



An Inconvenient Heart

A Regency Historical Romance

By
Grace Colline

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Also by Grace Colline:

An Inconvenient Engagement

An Inconvenient War

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Chapter One

Henrietta Darrow had lived in Hadring Hall since the day of her birth nearly twenty years earlier. Wealthy, beautiful, and talented, she was exactly the sort of young lady who epitomized heroines in novels. So much so, that people were inclined to think and view her as such in a somewhat dismissive way. Henrietta knew better. She was well read and had an active mind in addition to her other attributes. Indeed, she had so many qualities she could rely on that, though she herself was quite naturally aware of her appearance, she was most unnaturally unaffected by it.

The morning post had been delivered, and Henrietta found a letter on her breakfast tray. She opened it with a delicate frown and read the few short sentences.

Her eyes widened, and she immediately rang the bell. When her maid stepped into view, Henrietta said, "Hatcher! I must get dressed. And have the pony trap brought round. I have a visit to make!"

Then she drank her tea, ate one egg and two pieces of toast, before setting the tray aside. By then, Hatcher had returned and was ready to help her, holding up a pale turquoise garment.

Henrietta dismissed it and pointed to the simple white morning dress. "And the rose pelisse. Thank you, Hatcher."

She rushed her maid through the dressing of her hair and slipped into her shoes as she was leaving the room. She swept down the staircase, pulling her gloves on as she went and half-ran out the door and down the steps to where Marches, her pony, and the trap were waiting. She climbed in and took the reins, then quickly guided him down the long, circular drive.

Sunlight glinted off the brightly colored leaves. Birds sang in the trees, which rustled with the light breeze, but she saw only the road creeping along at her pony's leisurely pace. She was tempted to slap the reins to encourage him to pick up the pace but did not. A wagon rolled by and she lifted a hand in greeting as Marches trotted along.

After driving over the bridge, she had to maneuver through town, stopping more than once as housewives and children crossed mindlessly in front of her.

Before the trap pulled into the drive of the Pratt home, the door burst

open. "Hen!"

Penelope ran from the house where she had been watching for Henrietta. She had a willowy figure and stood taller than Henrietta with a sweet, kindly expression and an interesting nose. She rushed from the house dressed in her white morning dress and green spencer with matching bonnet.

"Pen!" Henrietta hugged the other girl. "Isn't this just the best news?" Henrietta held the reins to keep the trap steady while Penelope climbed aboard. "Hurry, darling, I am all agog and we must see her and get the whole story! I knew something was amiss!"

Penelope settled into the seat. "She did confide something of her feelings when we were in London."

Henrietta gave the reins a tap. "Lucky Sir William! He has dodged a horrid wife."

"Henrietta, think what your mother would say!" Penelope tried not to giggle.

"Oh, I am sure I will hear enough of what Mama has to say."

They were passing through the town and she had to keep Marches' speed down to a leisurely walk. Once through, she urged him to a faster pace past the church, over the bridge and to just where the lane bent beneath the bank, until they pulled up in front of Little Cottage. Marches was tethered at the carriage house and the girls walked to the front door.

It was opened by the housekeeper, Mrs. Beams, who was barely able to contain herself. "Oh, ladies, do come in and I will see if Miss Eliza is awake."

She bustled off and up the simple stairs while the girls sat in the front parlor.

They had only a few minutes to wait before Eliza came downstairs, yawning delicately. Her dark hair was simply fastened, as though she'd been in a hurry. She wore a peach dress with black sprigging and had a shawl about her shoulders to ward off the morning chill.

Her dark eyes shone with excitement as she said, "I have a feeling you got my letters." She smiled at them.

"Yes! You must tell us everything." Henrietta all but clapped her hands together. "When did it start?"

She pulled her to the settee and all three sat down.

"How to answer that!?" Eliza checked to see that the wonky leg on the settee was holding, then sighed. She thought back over the course of the past months and said, "I suppose it had been coming along, especially since the day of your ball."

Henrietta sighed gaily. "And now we are to have a wedding. When is it to be?"

"We have not decided. It was only last night, after all." She smiled.

"Well, when would you like it to be?"

Eliza dropped her voice and glanced around before whispering, "Soon!"

Penelope's face reddened, Henrietta's eyes widened, and Eliza blushed a

little.

“But, we have yet to discuss it. Probably around Easter.”

There was a sound of carriage wheels in the driveway and then a voice. Footsteps crunched on the gravel and a knock sounded at the door. Eliza went to answer it, finding Sir William on the stoop. She tilted her head up shyly, and he bent and kissed her gently, much to the merriment of Henrietta and Penelope.

“I had hoped to entice you out for a drive, but I see you have company.”

“And we were just on our way out.” Henrietta stood and hauled Penelope after her. “Congratulations, Sir William.”

They skipped out to Henrietta’s elegant pony trap, past the older carriage that had belonged to Sir William’s father.

“That will soon be replaced, I am sure,” said Henrietta.

They climbed aboard and Henrietta chirruped to Marches, guided him around the larger carriage, and back toward town.

“I won’t take you back to Hading, Pen. Mother is sure to be in a foul mood once everything is known and I had best handle that alone.” Penelope nodded, and sighed. She envied Henrietta having her mother still living, but yet she had a hard time of it.

As they came up to the Post stop, they saw George Strathom, Sir William’s brother, standing in front of Dimmits. Nearly as tall as his brother, he had dark hair that sprang from his forehead in a fashionable Beau style. Broad-shouldered and solidly built, he cut a dashing figure even in the plain brown pants and tan waistcoat under his dark blue coat.

Henrietta reined the trap so that it was even with him and he stepped toward them.

“Well ladies, rather early for a drive, isn’t it? Or were you calling on Miss Denham this fair morn?”

“Why would we be doing that, pray?” Henrietta said archly.

George shrugged. “No reason. Except to winkle out of her all the juicy details of her very recent engagement.”

Penelope giggled. “Henrietta came first thing and got me. We are so happy for her...and him—them. For them.”

“As am I. Very.”

Henrietta eyed at him appraisingly. “I had thought at one time you were not so keen on the friendship.”

“Perhaps...perhaps at one time there was good reason for me to be somewhat discouraging.”

She winked and smiled. “Well, it did seem a hopeless case, did it not, what with that ridiculously inconvenient engagement of his! What are you doing here?”

“I thought my brother would be coming back by here and could take me home, but it seems his fair fiancée has bewitched him.”

“In all actuality, Henrietta, I need to stop here at Dimmits, if you don’t

mind. I can walk home.” Penelope’s eyes shone quite innocently as George helped her down.

“Oh, goodbye then!” Henrietta’s eyebrows lifted. “Well, then, Mr. Strathom. I have room for one if you would like a ride home.”

“Are you sure that is quite appropriate? You have no chaperone.”

“Well, we are both within sight of most of the people of Lytchley, and Tredwell Abbey is but half a mile beyond the edge of town. I think we should be sufficiently supervised.”

“If you say so.” He stepped into the trap and took the vacant seat. “Home, Miss Darrow!” He leaned back and grinned at her. Then he glanced about, waving at the people who had stopped to stare.

Henrietta ignored the rather shocked expressions of the villagers as she steered Marches through the occasional swarm of sheep and the shoppers stepping across the road. She particularly saw Addie Welles stare at them in surprise and realized this escapade would probably be all over the village by nightfall.

They were beyond the edge of town before George spoke. “I was sorry not to have had the dance you promised me at William’s ball.”

“Ah, yes, I was going to take you to task over that. You left me standing with the wallflowers and chaperones.” She twitched the reins to bring Marches over to the side as a wagon came toward them.

“As bad as that? I thought for certain I saw you dancing with someone afterward.”

“Mr. Tarrington. Yes. He is quite the sprightly dancer.”

“Indeed. Then I do not feel so bad. And I was on a mission in support of the happy union between your friend and my brother.”

She glanced over and favored him with a smile. “Then you are forgiven, but you must tell me the part you played.”

He did as asked, and his narrative lasted the few minutes it took to complete the journey. He enjoyed the shocked looks of the grooms as they pulled up the sweeping drive and stopped before the stairs where he stepped down. He bowed most formally, to which she nodded her head quite serenely in acknowledgement before chirruping to Marches.

She cast a glance behind her in time to see George grinning.

It was a beautiful morning for a drive, and yet Henrietta’s light heart sank as she neared Hadring Hall. She let Marches slow to a walk as they turned onto the drive leading to her home. The drive led up the broad hill to where the manor house stood. The short steps cascaded outward to the driveway.

The groom arrived to take control of Marches and she slowly climbed the stairs to the entrance. Sure enough, she’d barely stepped into the entry and was in the process of removing her hat when her mother swept down the stairs.

“Henrietta! Where have you been?” She stood in her brocade dressing

gown and linen cap.

"I was out for a drive with Penelope." Henrietta pulled the hatpin from her mouth and replaced it in the hat, handing it to the butler.

"You stopped by that wretched girl's home, didn't you?" Lady Loughton's bust was heaving with emotion, and the lappets of her cap were shaking.

"And if she did?" The viscount entered just then, still in his shooting clothes and accompanied by his son, the Honorable Reginald Darrow.

Reggie removed his hat, and his wide eyes went from his mother to his sister. Fidgeting with his pocket, he seemed very much as though he wanted to disappear into the wall behind him.

Lady Loughton turned on her husband. "I have tolerated your connection with that girl, but now you see what comes of it. The only eligible bachelor for miles has now been captured and canoodled by that, that..."

"Captured?" Henrietta echoed.

"Canoodled?" Reggie snorted. His mother's expression silenced him, however, and he leaned back farther against the wall.

The viscount sighed and pressed his fingers to the bridge of his nose. "My dear..." He struggled over the words. "You should be grateful that now our obligation to the family is done. Now that she is well settled..."

"There was no obligation, money thrown after the little..."

"My dear!" His head shot up then, and his voiced thundered.

Lady Loughton sniffed and made use of her handkerchief. "I am glad you find joy in this engagement. But you have a daughter to think of, and if you will not take her to London for the Season, then what is she to do? There is no one hereabouts for her!"

"There's Tollie..." Reggie said, referring to the family friend—Lord Tollingham, who lived in nearby Stanton.

Lady Loughton closed her eyes and breathed in deeply. "Tollie will never marry, Reginald."

Reggie considered this as he shrugged and sank farther back into the wall.

Henrietta's voice raised. "I wouldn't have Tollie anyway, he is as much of a brother as you, Reggie."

"Well, thanks ever so!"

"You know what I mean," she said.

Lady Loughton was still trembling with pent-up emotion. "You must do something for Henrietta. She has already been presented, and yet no one knows of her existence outside of Lytchley!"

Viscount Loughton sighed and waved his hand toward her in a circular motion. "Well then, Henrietta shall go to London for the Season, if that will please you and set your mind to rest. Find a house and I will take it for you, and she shall have all the dresses and such that she requires."

Lady Loughton's mouth dropped open for a single second before

snapping shut. She sniffed again, then almost smiled. "Well, that certainly seems appropriate. Our Henrietta will certainly have her pick of the Ton there. Oh! And we can go down early to make sure we get the best dressmakers for her wardrobe!" The agitation turned to excitement and her hands all but fluttered. "If you will excuse me, I need to make some inquiries about townhouses."

She turned and went back up the stairs, calling for her maid as she went.

Henrietta stood frozen. The London Season? Her first real Season!

She wasn't sure how she felt about that. She had only just made her Debut the year before. She had been to London since, of course. But not for anything like this and the thought was truly overwhelming.

She picked at the fingers of her gloves to loosen them, then delicately drew them off. Slowly, she climbed the stairs to her room where Hatcher waited to help her out of her pelisse.

"Did you hear, Hatcher? We are going to London for the Season."

"Oh my, that is exciting, Miss. And you will be having new dresses and such!"

"Yes." She went to sit in her window seat, staring out over the east drive that led to the Stanton road and on to the village proper. "I will miss Lytchley, though."

Chapter Two

George stepped lightly down the staircase to check that his bags were waiting by the servants' entrance. His brother had promised him the use of the carriage as far as Stanton; from there, he would have to take the mail coach. The clock chimed the twelfth hour and he sighed. It would be leaving Stanton long before he got there at this rate, and that meant another evening on the road. He waited somewhat impatiently for William's return, trying to decide if he should just postpone leaving or commit to another night on the road.

At long last, the carriage swept into the drive and William stepped out, adjusted his waistcoat, swept a hand over his tousled hair and stepped up the entryway stairs.

He caught sight of his brother and smiled. "Ah, George. Leaving so soon?"

"It is past noon."

William consulted his watch. "So it is. I apologize."

"Unnecessary. However, I really must go. The coach from Stanton will be leaving almost this moment."

Realization hit William then, and an expression of consternation replaced the carefree one there a moment earlier. "My fault, you will have missed it." He thought for a moment and then said, "Take the carriage to Welborough. Then you can catch the morning Post to London. It is the least I can do."

George's eyebrows shot up in relief. "Thank you."

They shook hands and George stepped into the carriage; the footman removed the step and shut the door. He waved to his brother then turned to consider the countryside as it passed before his eyes. They had to drive through Lytchley first, pausing at one point for a large flock of sheep to mill about and cross from one field to the next.

George sighed and leaned back. He envied so much of his brother's life—his home, his carriage. No, he thought, it was not his brother's carriage that he envied, but his independence. The ability to be completely in command of one's life. As it was, George could not even determine at what time he left to go home to London without waiting on his brother's desires.

He closed his eyes. In truth, he also envied William his choice of bride. Oh, not Eliza Denham, per se, but the ability to choose, even if that girl was

somewhat beneath him. He, George, would not have that luxury unless he was willing to choose poverty as his lot.

And George Strathom would not choose poverty.

Without an income, he had to find a way to establish himself and gain some independence. So, that left finding a wealthy young woman who would be satisfied with the second son of a first baronet. He did not think the rolls were overflowing with such young ladies.

He closed his eyes. He would need to partake of the coming Season—something he dreaded. His second since coming of age. He hated the thought of such mercenary motives. But what could he do? The alternative was to bring a wife to live in a borrowed home on his brother's income. His pride revolted at the thought.

They came to Stanton and he watched the pubs and shops and houses all sweep past at a reasonable pace. The streets were well appointed and there was nothing to hinder their progress. Soon enough, they were on the other side and continuing at a decent clip.

In Welborough, he had his things removed and found an inn to stay overnight in. The London coach would leave early, and he arranged to be called in time for breakfast. Then, he ate a supper of steak and kidneys with some fresh bread warm from the oven. The bed was moderately comfortable, and he had it all to himself, though morning came far too soon.

He did not sleep well despite the comforts, his mind racing ahead to London and his mother's reaction to the news of William's engagement. He could only hope William's letter arrived before he did so that he would not have to actually break the news.

He hired a cab from the Post station in London and arrived at Lincoln House in time for early tea. He could already see it being set in the dining room.

George had barely removed his gloves when his virulently blonde mother swept out of the parlor toward him, brandishing a letter in one hand. "What is this? What is the meaning of this?"

"Of what, Mother?" George asked innocently as he slipped out of his coat.

"This....engagement of your brother's! To the governess!"

"She is not a governess, Mother." He handed his gloves and coat to the butler, who then accepted his hat.

"As good as. What is all this about Maria Lockley running off?"

"She eloped from Tredwell—shockingly poor taste, to my mind." He straightened his coat and waistcoat, then brushed at his sleeves.

"Eloped? Ridiculous! I am sure there must have been some neglect on William's part. She seemed far too well-bred to have done such a thing without provocation!"

George laughed shortly. "Provocation? Mother, she invited her lover to her fiancé's home disguised as her brother. I can assure you, this cannot be

laid at William's feet."

She screwed her childlike face into a mask of distaste. "I don't know why you always defend him."

He sighed. "Because he is one of the best men I know. He reminds me of Father, who I miss. Now, if you will excuse me..."

"I suppose you will be going back to Lytchley for Christmas."

"Yes, I had thought we might both be going. So much to celebrate now."

She sniffed and pulled her wrap closer about her. "As to that... I don't believe I will be going. I have some engagements here in town and I would prefer not to put them off."

"With whom?"

"Just some acquaintances," she said vaguely. "You can run along to Lytchley at Christmas and see your brother and the governess. I shall stay here."

George cast a speculative glance at his mother. It was unlike her to be so reticent when it came to social engagements. Though just above forty, she was, he realized, reaching an age when perhaps such things were behind her. He put the thoughts aside and went to his room to change from the road.

Supper was a quiet affair; his mother was unusually silent. He had expected some more vitriol directed toward Eliza, but instead she seemed distracted by other thoughts. She had left off wearing her cap and was sitting with her hair dressed as though she was a much younger woman. She had also forsaken the chemisette she had been wont to wear and her dress was perhaps a finger's width lower in the bodice than he would have expected.

His eyebrow rose, but he left her to her thoughts.

The next day, he rode out to Hyde Park to take an early gallop across the field. It was not crowded, far too early in the Season for there to be many riders. Once the full Season began, it would be alive every morning and afternoon, but now there were just a few sedate mounts. Although across the park he could see a couple of rather careless young men. They came riding far too fast toward him and pulled up just to his left.

"Ford, race you to that tree," said a young man with dark auburn hair who sat on his horse rather well.

The other was short with sandy hair, and shouted back, "Beat you and your nag, D'Courcy!"

And then the two were off, racing down the field toward the other end with their hooves throwing up clods of turf behind them. George shook his head as one or two other horses shied from their antics. He set his own horse to a careful canter in the opposite direction.

It was late in the morning before he reached home. His mother was awake and sitting with a cup of tea beside the fire. Her dressing gown surrounded her in a cloud of fine, white linen, and he smiled at how cherubic she could still look.

"Good morning, Mother," he said and sat across from her.

“Goodness, George, you smell of horses.”

“Well, I have been riding, Mother. Perhaps you would like to join me sometime?”

“I think not. I have never even owned a riding habit.” She set the teacup down on the little table to her side.

“They are fashionable, think how splendid you would be!” he teased.

“Ridiculous child! I have no need to sit atop a smelly animal just to appear fashionable.” She tossed her head, and the firelight caught the silver amidst the gold hair sweeping along the side of her head.

George bit his lip at the thought. “No, I imagine you don’t.”

“I am going out this evening, don’t wait up for me.”

“I shan’t, but where are you going?” he asked.

“Just a little supper party, nothing that would interest you.”

George let it go. He stood and said only, “I’m off to get cleaned up.”

He mock-saluted her, and she waved him off with a smiling grimace.

It was cloudy the next morning he chose to ride Hyde Park. Clouds blanketed the sky in gray and the air felt heavy, as though rain were imminent. He decided to keep his exercise short and hopefully get indoors before the rain began. He glanced over the riders and saw that many seemed to have had the same idea.

A familiar pair caught his eye—the same two young men were there, joined by a young woman with startlingly red hair and dark eyes. Her chaperone followed in a dowdy habit on the broad back of an older mare.

The girl was pleading with one of the young men. “Cecil, please be nice! Moira is skittish today.”

Cecil and his friend rode in circles around her horse and George could see her horse’s head snatching upward in nervousness. The circle tightened, and then the boys broke off and the girl worked to settle her horse which was truly riled up by this point. D’Courcy’s horse chose to kick out at that moment, and the girl’s horse snatched her bridle and pulled the reins free of the girl’s hands, taking off at a full gallop.

The red-haired girl was nearly unseated over the sidesaddle but managed to catch herself and pull herself up. George instantly spurred his horse after her.

Her reins had dropped, and she was clinging to the pommel of the saddle with the horse running flat out. Luckily, George’s horse was faster, and he quickly gained ground, racing to reach the horse’s head before it decided to dash into traffic. He tried not to look at the terrified expression on the girl’s face as he reached, reached...then had hold of the horse’s bridle.

He deftly reined his horse in and slowed the runaway down, bringing her to a stop. He was sweating with the exertion and the horses were puffing heavily from their gallop.

The girl slid down from her mount and nearly collapsed from weak knees. He jumped down and supported her while her chaperone struggled,

urging her horse to catch up with theirs.

“Oh thank, you, sir,” she said, panting and shaking with adrenaline.

“Not at all, Miss...?”

“Abernethy.”

“Well, I am George Strathom. Pleased to meet you, Miss Abernethy.”

She laughed rather breathily and accepted the reins of her horse. Her chaperone had reached them by then and was clucking about. Her groom also arrived, and George tipped his hat and mounted his horse and left them.

He rode his horse gently to allow him to calm down as they walked back to Lincoln House. There, he gave instructions to the groom to make sure the horse was cooled properly before he went inside.

He was surprised to see his mother had not left yet and appeared to be waiting for something as he came in.

She glanced up and then at the clock and said, “What happened to your ride?” She seemed almost distressed that he was home so quickly.

George explained and she clicked her tongue at the escapade. “Really, George, you could have been hurt.”

“Nonsense. My horse was perfectly behaved. Hers wasn’t vicious, just panicked.”

His mother waved away the topic of horses with her hand and went out the door when a carriage pulled up. George watched as his mother got in and was whisked away. He frowned and made a mental note to quiz her about it.

It was late when she finally arrived home, and George was relaxing by the fire, reading. She came in at a rapid pace and made straight for the stairs, but George cleared his throat and put his paper down. He said nothing, merely appraised her with raised his eyebrows.

“Yes, George?” She tossed her head impatiently.

“I just wondered where you had been.”

“Out. With friends,” she said, chin up.

“Excellent,” he said. “Who, may I ask?”

She stiffened and glared at him haughtily from her height on the stairs. “My friends. And it is none of your concern. You certainly don’t tell me everywhere you go and who you are out with.”

“You are absolutely right, Mother. It is none of my business and I apologize,” George said, almost sincerely.

The Dowager Lady Strathom sniffed and frowned suspiciously, then continued to sweep up the stairs to her room. George watched her go and sighed. He went to pick up the paper, but paused. His brow creased as he thought about his mother’s behavior. If he hadn’t known better, he would’ve thought she was seeing someone.

He pushed up from the chair and made his way upstairs to his room. Shedding his robe, he stepped into the window alcove and pushed the curtain aside so he could peer out. His window looked out over the street that faced the back of Lincoln House. A small garden and carriage house filled his view.

He loved this part of London and enjoyed his life in Lincoln House. The uncertainty over whether he would be able to keep it after his mother died caused something to tighten in his chest. He had not known how much he had wanted that until that very moment.

Turning from the window, he made his way to bed, kicking off his slippers. His chest strained at the linen of his shirt as he bent to pull the covers up. Finally, he closed his eyes and turned his face to the pillow.

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A few weeks later, he was back in Lytchley for the Christmas festivities. Upon his arrival at Tredwell Abbey, he found an invitation to a Christmas ball at Lord Tollingham's estate in nearby Stanton.

Sir William said, "That arrived yesterday, but I have not answered as of yet. I am not inclined to go, but I wondered if you would care to."

George's eyebrows rose. "I might as well. The Season is coming up, so I will be making the rounds."

William grinned. "Perhaps you would answer him and let him know."

"Certainly."

George picked up the invitation and carried it to the desk in the library. He thought for a moment, glancing out the window over the back of his brother's estate. Tredwell Abbey was a perfectly sized house with an appropriately manicured garden in the back and a fine driveway out front. His thoughts went to that other estate in Lytchley, and he wondered if Henrietta would be going to Tollie's ball.

The days up until the ball were filled with shooting in the morning, riding out over the estate and surrounding lands in the afternoon. They fled swiftly, and it was not long until George was stepping free of his brother's carriage before the curved steps that led to the porticoed entrance to Brindlewood.

Lord Tollingham was not there to greet him, for George had timed it so that he would arrive a little late. He went through the main doors and along the halls until he reached the large ballroom to the right. Every candle was lit, and George whistled silently at the cost in wax that evening.

The room before him glowed with light and resounded with music. George felt his spirits rise as he stepped into the whirlwind of sight and sound.

The dance floor was lively, and he had to edge his way around the perimeter and through the throng of on-lookers to find his host. He was surrounded and was in the midst of detailing his duel with the Marquess of Dauntton from some months prior.

"Oh, Lord Tollingham, you could have been killed!" a plump young woman said in a faint wail.

"Was nearly gutted as it was!" said an extremely well-heeled young man.

"All healed and tip-top now, though. And with a good mind to dance—who will have me?"

The ladies all clamored and Tollie winked at George. He took the first

one's hand and led her to the dance floor. The others paired off and followed suit, leaving George to shake his head after them. He glanced over the dancing couples and saw a familiar golden head in their midst. He leaned back against the wall to watch.

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Many minutes later, Henrietta came off the floor, breathless from the dance. Just then, Lord Tollingham appeared next to her, his own fair partner having been whisked away. He wasn't much above thirty, but yet had been a regular part of the Loughton set for most of her life. He reached out and grabbed her hands as though to continue dancing.

"So, m'dear, you are off to London for the Season," he said, twirling her before sitting her down at the supper table.

"Tollie"—she admonished in a hushed voice—"pray, don't! You will make me dizzy."

"My apologies, dearest Hen."

"That is very familiar, Lord Tollingham."

He drew himself up and held an imaginary monocle to his eye and said in clipped tones, "Oh, ever so sorry, Miss Darrow. Do, do forgive me."

"That's all right." But her eyes twinkled.

He sobered suddenly.

"Dear Miss Darrow, do be careful," he said with a slight frown.

Her brows knit at that. "What do you mean?"

"The Season can make people do things. I would hate to see you hurt."

"Tollie." She laid her hand on his arm. "I don't think I can get in much trouble dancing and attending breakfasts."

He looked at her. "Every year, girls are ruined by events that are not their fault. Society is much harder on ladies than gents, you know."

"I do. And knowing Mama, every precaution will be taken. Really, Tollie, so serious." She patted him on the arm in an attempt to snap him out of his seriousness.

"I am. I have half a mind to just marry you myself and keep you out of it," he replied.

"Well, I would have to have something to say about that. And, much as I adore you, I don't think you are the marrying type," she said archly.

He grinned at her. "Well, perhaps for you..."

She laughed. "No, Tollie. But if I get very desperate, I may perhaps take you up on that."

He bowed and turned away but found himself surrounded by two or three other young ladies. He closed his eyes and waved a hand. He stopped and opened his eyes, then held out his hand to a young lady who gladly took it. He flashed his eyes at Henrietta and then minced off with his partner. She smiled and shook her head.

She reached up on her tiptoes to stare over the heads of the other guests,

not quite sure who or what she was searching for. There was a concerted rush toward the dance floor now that the overture had begun, and she found herself scanning the couples. She walked the perimeter of the dance floor and continued looking.

Her mother appeared behind her and said, "What are you doing, Henrietta?"

She jumped and then breathed out. "Mama! I am just trying to see if there is anyone I know."

"Such as?"

"Well, Eliza perhaps, and Sir William."

"Sir William declined, I believe, but his brother is here."

"George? Where?"

Her mother's gaze shifted to just above her head to the left and she heard a voice say, "Right here."

She spun and smiled up at him.

He held out his hand and asked, "May I?"

"Of course."

She allowed herself to be led to the dance floor and they joined the set quite seamlessly. George seemed to be watching the other dancers and concentrating on his moves.

Henrietta said playfully, "Don't you remember this one?"

"No, what is it?" He watched her and followed along as best he could.

"The Prince of Brunswick," she said gaily.

"Ye Gods." He made a wrong start, corrected, then followed the gentleman to his left. He then met Henrietta in the center.

"Around and back to your place," she whispered softly. "Then meet the opposite partner."

George complied, and seemed to pick up the general sequence of the steps. "I shall have to talk to Lord Tollingham about his selection of dances."

"It is a perfectly typical dance, Mr. Stratham," Tollie said as he sailed by.

Henrietta lifted a gloved hand to her lips, but her sparkling eyes gave her laughter away. George crooked one side of his mouth up in good humor and they finished the dance relatively successfully. He led her away from the floor and she laughed up at him in a way that caused a catch in his chest.

"Thank you for the dance lesson," he said in her ear over the noise of the room.

Her shoulders began to shake, and her head whipped up, eyes seeking his out as she giggled aloud. "Oh, Mr. Strathom! That was wonderful."

"You delight in torturing me."

"No!" She smiled wider. "It is delightful to see a man able to take commands from a mere girl."

He frowned playfully at her and settled her near the supper table. "Miss Darrow, I cannot imagine any man not willing to take commands from you."

Just then, Lord Tollingham plopped into the seat beside her. "Such

superior dancing, Mr. Strathom!"

"Shut up, Tollie!" George growled good-naturedly.

"Oh! Such manners! I take it the Prince of Brunswick was not on your dance master's list?" Their host was grinning.

"I should say not. Or, if it was, I do not recall it." George laughed.

"You know what that tells me?" Tollie raised an eyebrow and smirked.

"No," George said. "What?"

He leaned forward and said, "You need to attend more dances. I suggest you attend the Season with our delightful Miss Darrow here and practice, practice, practice!" He then sped off, leaving the two of them alone.

"Will you be attending many balls this Season?" she asked, a little diffidently.

"I expect so, as many as I am invited to." He watched as a young gentleman approached, obviously about to ask for a dance with Henrietta.

"Well then, perhaps we will be meeting again." She rose to accept the invitation and disappeared into the crowd, but not before gracing George with a smile over her shoulder.

He returned it, watching her disappear onto the dance floor and thought to himself, *Yes, yes, perhaps we will.*

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Within a week, it was Christmas, and his brother's home was warm with the double joy of the holiday and his engagement. Christmas supper was a family affair, with the added invitation of the Loughtons and the Pratts.

George dressed rather more carefully than usual for the party. By the time he came downstairs, Eliza and her family had arrived. His brother's face was alight with a joy he had never seen there before. Something warmed within him as he stepped forward to greet both Eliza and her uncle, Alaister Enger.

"Sir, it is good to see you again," he said warmly as he shook the elder man's hand.

"And you, Mr. George, and you!" Uncle Enger's lined face beamed above his stooped figure topped with a cloud of white hair. His faded blue eyes sparkled every time they fell upon Eliza.

"George, could you show Mr. Enger to the library?" William said. "He has expressed an interest in some of our books."

"Of course. This way, sir."

He caught Eliza squeezing William's arm in happiness as he led her uncle toward the small, but fully stocked, library. He very quickly oriented the elder gentleman, then quite precisely determined when his presence was no longer required and slipped away, leaving the antiquarian to peruse the books alone to his heart's content.

By the time he returned to the main room, the Loughtons and Pratts had arrived. Lady Loughton was seated in the best chair by the fire, with Lord

Loughton standing by William and discussing something in his hearty voice.

“Travers, again?” William said.

“Caught him poaching, by God! Had him flogged! Sent his family some of the spoils, though. Christmas and all—don’t want them going without.”

“Have a similar problem, though not to that extent. I wish they would tell me when they are in need, surely that would be preferable.”

“Pride, Strathom. The same for all of us. No one wants to admit that he can’t support his own family.”

George heard it, and secretly nodded to himself.

Eliza was huddled with Penelope and Henrietta. All three wore white with different colored sashes and jewelry to suit their particular coloring. Eliza, shortest and darkest of the three, was well-proportioned, her coloring set off by a dark rose sash. Penelope, tall and willowy with light brown hair, was set aglow with pale green ribbons. Henrietta was somewhere in between with the firelight dancing off the golden curls framing her face and a turquoise sash and simple pearl necklace.

He found himself grinning, then was shocked to see that Henrietta’s own piercing blue gaze was locked on his.

“Well, Mr. Strathom, and what are you thinking?”

He smiled and coughed slightly. “I was just thinking how well you three looked group’d so together!”

Henrietta’s eyes sparkled and Penelope glanced down. Eliza merely grinned from one to the other, then squeezed Henrietta’s arm and made her way to her fiancé’s side. George walked slowly to the other two girls.

“So, Mr. Strathom, you’ve braved the wilds of Lytchley for Christmas.”

“Indeed, Miss Darrow.”

“Perhaps we could ride together one morning?” She turned to Penelope. “Pen, would you join us? I have a mare that would suit.”

Penelope appeared somewhat alarmed at the thought. “I am no horsewoman, Hen, although Father keeps saying he wants me to try. But thank you all the same.”

“Well, we shall have to make do with Reggie, then, as chaperone,” Henrietta said with a playful pout.

“Where is the Honorable?” George asked.

Henrietta glanced upward. “Ill. Father is threatening to purchase him a commission in the Infantry and I fear he is ill with the thought of work.”

Penelope’s sweet expression twisted in instant sympathy. “Oh, poor Reggie, is he truly ill?”

“He truly has a bad throat, if that is what you are asking.” Henrietta smiled. “Shall I tell him you asked about him?”

“Yes, please do. Perhaps I will go ask your mother if there is anything I can do for him.”

She turned and made her way over to the fireplace; both George and Henrietta watched her go.

“That girl is too sweet for her own good,” George said.

“Yes, but some man is going to be very lucky.” Henrietta pulled her gaze back to glance up at George, and he felt a small stutter in his chest as her eyes met his. “Have you heard? I am going to be in London for this coming Season.”

George’s eyes widened in mock surprise. “I think I remember hearing something of the sort.”

“Yes, we are going up early so that I may find a dressmaker and have my things made.”

“Indeed. Which part of town will you be staying in?”

She sighed and glanced toward her mother, who sat talking quietly with Penelope. “I hardly know. Mother has been looking over advertisements for houses in town, but to no avail.”

“I wonder if I should mention that Radford House in Chelsea is available? It is quite elegant and has an exquisite pianoforte.”

“Really! Oh, that sounds perfect!” She held onto his arm quite firmly and directed him to her mother’s side. “Mother, have you found us a house yet?”

Lady Loughton closed her eyes in martyrdom. “No, indeed! I have decided that all agents are spawns of the devil who delight in vexing those such as I! I cannot find a truthfully spoken of home that is both within the fashionable areas and has a reasonable room to hold a ball in or a decent pianoforte for you to practice!”

“If I may, madam?” George said. “There is a house in a very good area of Chelsea called Radford House that may suit. I can personally attest to its suitability and the fact that it has an excellent Broadwood Grand pianoforte.”

“Does it indeed! Oh, sir, that is excellent news! I shall write an inquiry tomorrow! Do you perhaps know the name of the agent?”

George nodded and gave the name. Something inside him awoke at the thought of having the Loughtons so close to his own home.

Just then supper was announced, and they filed into the dining room for the festivities.

After the venison and the pudding, Henrietta and Penelope played for the company. Eliza cried off, knowing her skills were nothing when compared to the other two girls. Henrietta sang beautifully, and Penelope played beautifully. After each had presented a couple of pieces, Penelope played while Eliza and Henrietta sang a Christmas duet, charming all those gathered.

The evening ended with joyful wishes for the season as the carriages were called.

George stood on the front step, waved to the Loughtons’ carriage, and watched it sweep down the drive. He stood there for many more minutes, taking in the crystal starlight piercing the icy air. It was not long before the cold drove him back indoors, where his brother sat with his head leaning back against the chair.

“Worn out by a little Christmas party?”

“Worn out by life, if you must know.”

William indicated the decanter and George helped himself, then settled in one of the chairs by the fire.

“You must explain that, brother.” George took a sip of his drink.

William sighed. “There is so much that goes into running an estate.”

“Doesn’t Rivers handle much of it?”

William frowned. “I am not comfortable with such a hands-off approach to my own estate. I prefer to be involved with the day-to-day decisions that must be made. Besides, he has the stable to deal with, as well.”

“Ah. So, it is a choice, then. And this exhaustion is a good thing, or...?”

William turned his head toward his brother. “You are right, I have chosen it. I can see why Father was so adamant about establishing an estate. I do enjoy the challenge. That is not to say it isn’t a heavy load at times.”

George smiled. “But you have chosen just the wife to pitch in and help you with that burden.”

William nodded gently and sipped his brandy. “Indeed. I could not have chosen a better one. She already ministers to the sick and has given me several tips of where help is needed.”

George chuckled. “So there are attributes that outweigh a dowry, then.”

William nodded. “I have not even considered the dowry.”

“I am not so lucky in that.”

William took another drink. “No, I suppose not.” He considered the fire, then asked, “Is there any dowry in particular you are eyeing?”

“No, William, I have no sights on anyone in particular. You must admit it will be a hard case.”

“Indeed. I have some ideas on that, but perhaps now is not the time to discuss it.”

George looked at his brother. William’s forehead was creased with weariness and he decided against pressing him on his last statement.

Instead, he drained the last of his drink and stood, clapping his brother on the shoulder as he passed. “Happy Christmas, brother. I am off to bed.”

Chapter Three

“Oh—the Loughtons have taken Radford Hall.” George was glancing over the paper and made the announcement.

His mother, Delia, looked up and sighed. “I fear we will have to call on them.”

It was breakfast, some weeks after Christmas and she was opening her letters. She sat in her ruffled dressing gown at the table. A tiny coffee cup was to one side with what appeared to be cream, and a little coffee splashed into it for color. She sipped delicately, then added another spoonful of sugar and stirred thoughtfully.

George considered for a moment, then said innocently, “Isn’t that in this part of town?”

“Indeed. They will likely be in our set. I suppose I shall have to bear Lady Loughton’s superiority and precedence.”

“I suppose you shall.” George flicked the newspaper closed and drank the last of his tea. “Well, happily they will be busy with the activities of the Season and not available for quieter engagements.” He glanced at the clock and added, “I shall be out until later.”

He was up and out of the room before she could begin to question him. Not to be outrun, however, she stood and followed him.

“Wait just a minute.”

George paused halfway up the stairs.

She fiddled a moment with one of her rings, then said in something of an uncharacteristic rush, “I am having a little dinner party next week, and I especially want you to attend.”

He considered her. “Of course, Mother, I shall make a point of it.” He began up the stairs again, hoping to be allowed to reach the top, but that was not to be.

“There is someone who will be there that I particularly wish for you to meet. I expect you to be courteous and attentive.”

His head dropped forward, and he said, “Yes, Mother.” This time, he was able to reach his room without further address.

He sent to have Hermes, his horse, and the gig readied. Then he dressed with rather more than his usual care—dark blue coat and the waistcoat with

the tiny stripes woven in blue, tan, and white. His fingers fumbled slightly as he tied his cravat in one of the newer fashions and had to take it out twice before he got it right.

Stepping out the door just as his horse was being steadied to await him brought another lift to his spirits. He jumped up and chirruped to the chestnut, who tossed his head and stepped lightly off.

George smiled. He enjoyed the freedom granted by the gig more than anything else he owned.

He nodded to an acquaintance on horseback and steered around a cab whose horse had balked. Traffic was picking up as the morning waned into midday and he found himself stopped quite often by pedestrians and cabs pausing and trying to merge into the main traffic lane. Soon enough, though, they were on Winslow Street and Radford House was just ahead.

He saw the carriage out and wondered where it was bound. As he pulled up, Henrietta herself stepped from the carriage and he tipped his hat and hailed her.

“Good morning, Miss Darrow!”

“Mr. Strathom! Good day to you! What are you doing on this side of town?” She stepped aside as the footman took her boxes past her and into the house.

“Well, I happen to live in this side of town.”

Her eyebrows lifted. “Of course, you do. Lincoln House, is it not?”

A middle-aged lady stepped down from the carriage and rushed past Henrietta and into the house.

“It is indeed.” He frowned after the lady and turned a quizzical face to Henrietta.

“Mrs. Daggett is my chaperone. She is not well this morning.”

“Ah.”

She gestured after the boxes. “You see me returned from some early shopping. I found an excellent row of shops and we passed yet another on our way home this morning.”

“On King’s Road?”

“The very one! I see I should have applied to you for advice on which are the best shops!” She looked up and tilted her head to one side in a manner that caused his heart to jump. “Would you care to take tea and luncheon with us?”

Surprise lifted his eyebrows, but he replied, “Certainly, if your parents are in agreement.”

“Let me ask, shall I?”

Henrietta disappeared into the house for a few long moments, rather longer than George had expected.

When she finally returned, it was with a rather quick step and spots of red on each cheek. She slapped her glove against her palm and said without making eye contact. “Mother just reminded me of an engagement, and I fear we will not be able to have you join us just now.”

He was taken aback but strove to conceal it. "Ah. I am not surprised that your time is spoken for. I will bid you good day."

George turned away and was about to pull away into traffic when she called out after him.

"Mr. Strathom!"

He paused and turned back. Henrietta was playing with the fingers of one of her gloves.

"I really am most excessively disappointed," she said after a moment.

She lifted her head to gaze up at him and he stared into her deep blue eyes for a moment, then smiled. He understood. It was not her doing.

Nodding, he pulled out and steered Hermes back into mainstream traffic. He did not look back.

George had driven around the corner to a nearby ostler and left the horse and the gig. He had then walked slowly back along the road toward Radford House. He was fairly certain that the family had no engagements, but he wanted to see for himself that he had truly been spurned by the parents. And sure enough, he was in time to see the carriage being led off with no riders and obviously en route to the carriage house.

He walked past Radford House and went some ways down before turning back. He was almost even with the edge of the property when he heard the first faint tones of the piano. He stopped and listened.

It was coming from the front parlor, and he sheltered in the shade of a tree that grew just at the corner of the gated fence. He could hear Henrietta warming up, then the introduction began, and her voice rose in unison with the keys.

His eyes opened—he had never heard anything quite so lovely. He could just see the top of her golden head bent over the instrument from where he was standing. It was some minutes before he felt he could breathe normally. His chest twisted as he caught sight of her. Her eyebrows knit delicately together as she made some notation on the music. She started again, and then looked straight out the window toward where he was standing!

He leaned backward, putting the tree between them, and quickly turned to walk back the other way. He would have to walk the block in its entirety in order to return to the ostler where he had left the gig, but that would be better than being caught listening at the window like a lovesick...

Lovesick?

He shook himself. Surely not. He had far more sense than to fall in love with a woman so completely out of his range.

His steps slowed and he stopped, then leaned against the wall in front of a fashionable townhouse. He closed his eyes. His hand came up in an attempt to shield his brain from the awful realization.

He was in love with Henrietta Darrow!

Chapter Four

Henrietta gathered her skirt in one hand and lifted it out of the way so that she could climb the stairs back to the house. Once inside, she found her room where her packages had been deposited. She was much less interested in the new hat than she had been. She went to the window and sat down, managing to just catch the back of George's gig as it disappeared around the corner.

She closed her eyes. Mama had been beastly.

"We will have no Strathoms here! Nothing good can come of their society any longer and you will have far too many people to associate with this Season."

"Mama, Mr. Strathom is a very good neighbor in Lytchley and here in Chelsea. It will be strange if we do not associate with him and his mother."

"I am very grateful for him finding this house, but I had no idea it was so close to his own! The mother is a common upstart, and he is but the second son of a first baronet. There is nothing for you there."

A silent appeal to her father had gotten but a sideways glance from him to his wife, and no support. Henrietta had been forced to put up with her mother's rudeness.

She sighed. It had been such a pleasure to see him, and she somehow knew that the pleasure had been shared.

There was a knock at her door, and she turned. "Luncheon is served, Miss."

Henrietta nodded, but was no longer hungry. Still, she rose, checked her hair in the mirror, and returned downstairs to the dining room.

Her mother sat opening letters and glanced up at her as she entered. "We have been invited to the Abernethy's Ball, Thursday next. I think you should wear your royal blue—the Abernethys' daughter is a redhead and will probably be in green or white."

Henrietta nodded.

Her mother broke the seal on another letter and glared through her pince-nez at the writing. "The Honorable Miss Martinet...hmm. Father, the Earl of Medlows. Oh! This is nice. An afternoon tea only, but it is a start. We will be able to invite her to your ball in a few weeks. And then, if all goes well, there

will be her ball and that will open the door to other rich young men.” She smiled happily. “I hope your new cloak will be ready for the Abernethys’ ball. It will go so beautifully with your hair—you will be quite the angel! You need to practice your piano in case there is an invitation to play.”

Henrietta put down her fork and rose. “I will go do so now, if you will excuse me.”

Her mother waved her off, still engrossed in her post.

Henrietta made her way to the parlor and the pianoforte—one of the reasons they had taken Radford House. It was a beautiful instrument, inlaid with mother-of-pearl and fine woods. She ran her fingers tentatively over the keys to limber up, then began the introduction.

She had some degree of talent, though her abilities paled in comparison with Penelope’s. She did have her voice, however, and as the notes rang out, singing rose in soft accompaniment. Her own natural taste modulated her tones in perfect harmony with the song.

She was modestly satisfied when she finished, although she made a couple of notes with her small pencil in the margins of the music. She looked up, almost sure she was being watched. Then, she started again.

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The Loughton carriage pulled up to Dover House, the London home of Mr. and Mrs. Abernethy of Kent. It was a large, modern manor, furnished in an opulent fashion. Mrs. Abernethy was rail-thin and wore a gown fit for the Empress Josephine herself. Augusta Abernethy was rather plump by comparison, and her pale green satin gown could not quite master the orange cast to her hair. She had lovely dark eyes, though.

Henrietta found herself smiling deeply at the girl, who rushed to say, “Welcome, Miss Darrow.”

“A pleasure, Miss Abernethy.”

Henrietta’s mother ushered her into the main room where they were overwhelmed by the size of the space. The house seemed to have been built around a ballroom which doubled as a gallery. Some very fine portraits hung on the walls surrounding them. The orchestra was quietly tuning, and Henrietta wandered in her mother’s wake. They appeared to have been some of the last of the party to arrive, and the Abernethys soon left their post at the entrance and joined the crowd.

The center of the room began to clear to make way for dancing. She felt a touch on her elbow and turned to find George Strathom standing there.

“Miss Darrow, I was hoping to claim the dances we missed at William’s ball.”

“We danced at Tollie’s ball, remember?”

“Ah, I do not count what I did there as passing for dancing. I beg a chance to redeem myself!”

Her eyes lit up, then her gaze slid to her mother. She seemed engrossed

in a conversation with another matron. Henrietta turned back to George.

“I would like that, Mr. Strathom,” she replied.

The orchestra struck their first chords, and he led Henrietta out. They waited until Miss Abernethy and her partner had reached the floor first, then they joined the other couples entering the line.

“I am very happy to see you here, Mr. Strathom,” Henrietta said.

“Not so happy as I am to see you here.” His head tilted slightly as he gazed down at her.

“I did not get a chance to compliment you on your handsome gig when we met last week.”

He smiled and glanced down at her. “I would offer to take you out in it, but I fear there would not be room for your chaperone. I hope she is much recovered.”

She stifled a giggle. “Yes, indeed.” Her expression fell as she appraised the company.

“Are you enjoying London?” he asked.

They executed a rather complicated turn in perfect unison and then she answered, “It is very rigorous. I can see why many girls are undone by the pace. And, the Season has not even really started yet from what I understand.”

“No, Parliament is early this year—no sport.” He was silent for a moment, then said, “I think we men forget how difficult the Season can be for young ladies. It seems quite the machine capable of tearing individuals apart.”

“Indeed! You express it exactly! I feel as though I am being fed to some enormous beast! But you will think I am fanciful.”

“No, it seems a cruel tradition.” His expression turned grim for a moment before he shook it off. “I never thought I would say it, but I actually miss Lytchley sometimes.”

“As do I. Penelope and Eliza...I have no friends here... Except for you, of course.”

He sketched a little bow as they caught hands. “I am glad you consider me a friend, as I do you.”

She smiled a true smile then, and his own grin widened. The dance ended far too quickly, and he was forced to lead her back to her mother’s side and endure her draconian glare. He grinned broadly and bowed before her mother and then made his escape.

Henrietta watched him go with sorrow. In all of London, his was the only face that had cheered her for any length of time. She was soon accosted, however, by a very tall man with auburn hair and wickedly dark eyes. His coat was of darkest green with fine gold embroidery, and he had a saucy expression on his handsome face.

Mr. Abernethy accompanied him and bowed slightly to her mother. “My dear Lady Loughton, Miss Darrow. My cousin, the Honorable Cecil D’Courcy, is very desirous of making your acquaintance.”

Mr. D’Courcy bowed very nicely and reached for Henrietta’s hand. “And

now that we are acquainted, perhaps you will honor me with the next two dances?"

Henrietta could feel her mother's silent encouragement and she acquiesced to the request.

Mr. D'Courcy led her off to the floor and treated her to some very accomplished dancing. He was obviously well-practiced and was able to amend his moves to that of his partner. Henrietta, not unaccomplished herself in dancing, had to work to keep up. And, from the slight upturn of one corner of his mouth, she could see that he was well aware of it. Nevertheless, she knew they cut a fine figure together—he with his green and gold and she in royal blue and gold. Many pairs of eyes were drawn to them as they danced, and she particularly noted George Strathom staring rather intently at her.

There was a scattering of applause as the dance ended, much of which was directed toward her and D'Courcy. She smiled, unaware of how well she looked with her cheeks alive and eyes sparkling from the effort.

"Are you over-warm, Miss Darrow?" Mr. D'Courcy asked.

"I am, a little. Dancing is underrated as exercise."

"Indeed," he said as he steered her toward the door leading to the garden. "Perhaps some fresh air?"

She hesitated. "I must just tell my mother, first."

He opened the door for her, smoothly saying, "We will be right out here where she can see us through the windows. It really is oppressively hot in here!"

Then she was outside, with the door shut. Suddenly, she was very aware that she was standing alone in the garden with a virtual stranger who had a secure hold on her arm.

A tiny note of alarm crept into her voice as she said, "Really, I must return to my mother."

Just then the door opened, and George Strathom came outside. He caught sight of them, nodded and lifted a hand. D'Courcy's grip on Henrietta's arm loosened somewhat and he stepped away from her. She had not been aware of how close he'd been.

"Miss Darrow! My turn, I believe, though I hope you don't think I will be able to match your partner's abilities." George leaned forward, the smile not quite reaching his eyes. A white dent was apparent on either side of his jaw. "Mr. George Strathom"—he bowed very slightly to the other man—"a friend of the Loughtons."

D'Courcy's lip curled. "Cecil D'Courcy. Well, it would seem I have to release my fair partner."

George very firmly took Henrietta's arm and led her back inside.

"Mr. Strathom, I hope you don't think..."

"No, Miss Darrow. I saw it all. That fellow is too smooth by half. I hope you don't mind my presumption in interfering, but he seemed to have taken you off guard."

"I'd no idea I needed to be *on* guard," she said ruefully.

"Of course not. Some of these pups think it a form of fun and a challenge to see if they can get a young lady into a compromising position. They have no thought for what the young lady might feel."

Just then, Lady Loughton pushed through the crowd to their side. "Henrietta, what do you think you are doing?! Outside without my knowledge? With this...with Mr. Strathom!"

"Mama, Mr. Strathom was claiming me from Mr. D'Courcy for a dance."

"You have already danced with Mr. Strathom. Sir, you will forgive me, but I must intercede. My daughter is much in demand."

"Of course, madam."

He released Henrietta's hand and stepped aside as her mother took his place. His gaze followed them weaving through the crowd until Henrietta's head turned and her eyes sought his out. He read the mute entreaty there and his expression softened.

Henrietta truly was much in demand. Soon after George left her, she was introduced to the Lord Charles Tymonds, son of the Duke of Bletchley. Blue-eyed, sandy-haired and nearly as tall as George, he cut a dashing figure in his black jacket and navy-blue waistcoat.

"Miss Darrow, would you honor me with the next two dances?"

Henrietta found herself charmed. "Of course, Lord Charles."

She was led off to the floor once again and very firmly established in the line by her partner.

"Do you ride, Miss Darrow?" He said as he bowed in introduction.

"Indeed, yes."

"Have you ridden Rotten Row yet?" He waited for her hand to catch his.

"Not yet, but I have wanted to do so."

"What prevents you?"

Her eyes widened at the question. "Merely the busy nature of my schedule."

"You are much in demand, then." He executed a turn, and she was forced to sidestep in order to stay in rhythm with him.

"It would seem so. My outdoor exercise has been neglected as of late."

"I cannot imagine life without being out on horseback as frequently as possible," he said in superior tones.

"It is certainly one of my favorite activities."

"Then perhaps I will see you there one day."

He smiled distantly and she completed a turn. The entire time, she was left wondering why she felt as though she was being interviewed for a position. He asked several questions about her family before the dances were complete, then left her very graciously at her mother's side.

As soon as he had left, Lady Loughton caught Henrietta's arm and whispered, "Do you know who that is?"

"Ouch! Mama, yes, as I have just danced this half an hour with him."

“What did he say?”

“Something about seeing me on Rotten Row and questions about my family.”

“Ah. He is looking into your connections, then.”

“Mama! Really!”

Lady Loughton shook Henrietta’s arm. “Don’t be silly! What do you think this is all for?”

Henrietta carefully disengaged her arm from her mother’s clutches. “I am well aware of what this is all about.”

“Good! Then keep your wits about you.”

She seemed ready to say more, but Henrietta was just then accosted by a thin, reedy young man desirous of her hand for the next dance. Henrietta very willingly allowed herself to be led away from her mother.

The rest of the evening blurred past for Henrietta. With no chance of dancing with George, she found the long string of partners to be nearly indistinguishable from one another.

Finally, their carriage was called and they stood waiting for the footman to help them in.

Henrietta sank back against the carriage seat and breathed as deeply as she could with her corset. Her mother fussed with a lap rug and her own cloak as the carriage started up. Henrietta was exhausted and let her head roll against the back of the cushion while the carriage rocked gently from side-to-side.

“Well, I think that was a success! You danced every dance, I believe! I have found out that Mr. D’Courcy is a well-connected young man, but without much money, I believe. Lord Charles, however, now that is a real possibility. Second son of a Duke! Lady Charles Tymonds—how well that sounds!”

“Really, Mama! I only just met the young man.”

“We shall see—if he calls on you, then we will know.”

“Know what?”

“That he is courting you!”

“Perhaps I don’t want him to court me...”

“Oh, Henrietta! Why wouldn’t you? A title, estate, etc. What isn’t there to want?”

Henrietta had no answer that her mother would understand, and so she said nothing. She was thinking of the lift of her spirits as George had come to her rescue in the garden. The look in his eyes had been so intense, it had burned through her and stirred something very deep inside of her.

She frowned a little, considering...

Was it possible she was more than a little in love with George Strathom?

Chapter Five

George glanced over the paper and then set it aside. He took a sip of tea and noted that his mother was stirring her coffee yet again. She had gone through her letters and was being uncharacteristically silent as she stared at the table, watching her spoon tink lightly against the side of her tiny cup.

He cleared his throat. "Well, Mother, isn't tonight the night of your supper party?"

She set her spoon down in the saucer and looked up. "Yes. Yes, it is. I trust you will be in attendance."

"I gave my word."

She made a moue of distaste. "When you say it like that it sounds quite... quite..."

"Reluctant?" He placed a forkful of eggs into his mouth.

The spoon clattered. "Yes." She glared at him. "I don't understand why you have to take that attitude with me."

He swallowed. "I meant no offense, Mother."

"Well, you have a very sarcastic way about you. I hope you will keep it under control this evening."

"I will do my utmost," he said in mock submission. Really, he wondered, she was extraordinarily uptight that morning.

"And that is exactly what I am talking about!" She ran a hand along her hairline and tweaked at a curl.

He sighed. "Have you heard from William?"

Her lips compressed. "Yes. They have set a date."

Ah, he thought. *Mystery solved.* "Easter?"

She did not answer. Her expression became even more sour, if that was possible.

He smiled. "I guess I will be going home for Easter. Care to join me?"

She finished sipping her coffee and set it down very carefully. "I think not. I prefer the London air to that of Lychley."

"It is the sheep, perhaps."

"It is the people."

"Ah. I find the people charming, and the village really has a calming air about it." The corner of his mouth lifted.

“Sheep.”

“I thought it was people.” Delia glared daggers at him. “Now, Mother, I have some business to tend to today, but I shall be home in time to dress for supper.”

“I want you to wear your black jacket.”

“As formal as that?!”

“You look remarkably well in that particular suit.” She lifted a knife and adjusted a curl in the reflection. “Well, actually, you look rather well in anything, but your black will set off my gown quite nicely.”

“Ah. Anything I can do to set off your gown, then...”

Delia glanced up with suspicion, but George was very innocently perusing the paper. “What business do you have to tend to today?”

He folded the paper and set it down. “I need to choose a wedding present for William and Eliza. Have you any suggestions?”

“A pair of sheep shears, perhaps? Engraved?” She said, staring out the window.

“Hmm. I shall, of course, be on the lookout for such. I am sure William will especially appreciate your thoughtfulness.”

“Sarcasm is beneath you, George.”

“But not you?” He hurried on before she could reply. “I will be taking a cab so that I will not have Hermes out, standing all day. Hopefully, I will avoid any mishap!”

“We have the carriage,” she said with a sniff.

“Same thing. No reason for a man and horses to be out all day while I potter about shops.”

He wiped his mouth and set the napkin down, dropped a kiss on his mother’s head as he strode by, and disappeared up the stairs.

A few streets over in Radford House, Henrietta was picking at her toast and rereading the letter from Eliza. Her mother was once again opening her letters and making notes on a calendar.

“The Bowbridges have invited us. I think we must go. They are somewhat beneath us, but I understand they have an excellent guest list. Definitely sending regrets to the Tallworthys...not another supper party!”

“Mother, may I take Helen and go shopping today?”

Without looking up, Lady Loughton replied, “And where are you wanting to go shopping?”

“Just along King’s Road. I need some new gloves—Hatcher cannot get those stains out of my old ones.”

“Well, you might as well go, then. If you see a plain bonnet, you should get that as well. You need something to make go with that new morning pelisse.”

“What an excellent notion. Of course.”

“Don’t keep the horses out all day,” her father spoke for the first time.

“No, of course not.” She rang the bell and instructed the footman,

“Please send for Mrs. Daggett.”

Mrs. Daggett was a distant relative of Lady Loughton’s on her father’s side. She had fallen on difficult times and come to live with the Loughtons in London as an on-call chaperone for Henrietta. She was a round little figure of a woman, with prematurely graying hair arranged under her cap and deep, careworn lines around her mouth.

She bustled in wearing an old-fashioned gown. “Yes?”

Henrietta quickly explained the situation.

Mrs. Daggett fluttered and said, “Oh, of course, I was just embroidering that altar cloth for the church, but it can wait. I will go get changed right now.”

She hurried off and Henrietta set down her napkin and stood to bid her parents good morning. As she reached the door, she turned. “Oh, Father, I also especially wanted to find something special as a wedding present for dear Eliza and Sir William. They have set a date for Easter and I will need time if something needs engraving. I hope that meets with your approval.”

The viscount looked up and waved a hand vaguely about. “Of course, my dear. Pick out whatever you want and have them send me the bill.”

Henrietta smiled at her father and left before her mother could retort with some acidic reply. She heard the rumblings of another argument beginning as she reached the staircase.

Within an hour, she and Mrs. Daggett were ensconced in the carriage and on their way to the fashionable shopping district of Chelsea. The haberdashers, Whitlows, was the first stop.

Henrietta took her time selecting a pair of gloves, and Mrs. Daggett chose a small needlebook and two skeins of colored embroidery floss. Henrietta glanced over their ready-made bonnets, noting that many of them seemed to have a sweeping edge about the brim and a more volume to the crown. None seemed suitable, however, either in color or in style, to go with the pelisse and she finally left with only the pair of gloves. By that time, there were more people about, and they had to weave their way more carefully along.

As they were walking, Henrietta stopped at a small shop that had all the marks of a dressmakers with but two or three bonnets in the window and went inside. Mrs. Daggett clucked and fluttered at the small size of the shop, but followed along.

Though it was narrow, the shop was well lit, and sunlight shone in on the bonnets in the window. Henrietta lifted one off the pedestal.

A soft, bright voice behind her said, “That would go so beautifully with the color you are wearing!”

Henrietta turned. A young woman, with pins in her apron, was arranging a dress on a form several feet away.

Henrietta nodded, her eyes alight. “It is the very thing I was wanting—and I won’t even need to trim it up in any way!”

The lady smiled. "Shall I box it for you, then?"

"Indeed, but I must look about some more."

Henrietta wandered deeper into the shop and found a gown, ready-made, in rose satin and silk organza. It was placed just so the late morning light from the windows would strike it and play along the organza trim and the ornate puffs about the sleeves.

"Oh my....this is exquisite."

The lady smiled. "Thank you. It would just about fit you, too."

"Miss Henrietta, your father did not say you could buy a dress." Miss Daggett was eyeing a chemisette that was far too small for her ample bosom.

"No, no, he did not." She fingered the overskirt and touched the sleeves gently. "Oh, but Helen, this must be mine!"

She asked the price and received the answer. Her hand withdrew somewhat, but then she reached out once more.

"Can you adjust it to my measurements?"

"Of course."

"What is your name? I have a feeling I will be coming here more often!"

"Jemima Saunders."

"Well, Miss Saunders, please add this gown to the bonnet and have both sent to Radford House when ready!"

"Of course. Come into the back room so I can take your measurements."

Henrietta went along while Mrs. Daggett continued perusing. Miss Saunders very quickly pulled a tape free and began measuring Henrietta. She noted the figures down in a small book that she stashed in her apron pocket.

"The dress is very close to your size already. I should have it sent out to you by this Friday."

"Excellent!"

Henrietta left feeling light-hearted. Several shops down, she found a silversmith and entered with Mrs. Daggett in tow. She browsed around, only to hear her name spoken in frank astonishment.

"Miss Darrow!"

She looked up and her smile widened, lighting her eyes. "Mr. Strathom!" He stood still in the very act of holding a set of silver-backed brushes. She eyed the brushes and stepped nearer. "I suspect we are here on similar errands."

His gaze fixed ruefully on the brushes in his hand. "I suspect so. I am in a dilemma, however. William has nothing personal that is fine, and I thought to get him this set as a wedding present. But I know that his fair fiancée is also without such finery, yet it would be too personal a gift for a brother-in-law to give."

Henrietta's gaze flitted over the sets in their velvet boxes. One stood out with elegant little roses chased onto the backs of the mirror, brushes, and the edges of the combs.

"Oh...perhaps we think alike, then. This would be perfect for Eliza."

Her eyes met his and her chest constricted at the expression on his face. She looked down immediately and set the brush back into its box. She gently closed the box and lifted it. "If you get that set for your brother, and I get this for Eliza, then the problem is quite solved."

He replaced the brush in the box as well and lifted his. "That sounds like a remarkably good plan."

They both made their way rather self-consciously to the counter where their goods were wrapped and payment arranged. As they walked slowly from the store, some hesitancy seemed to cling to them, a need to prolong the farewell.

George said in an uncharacteristic rush, "I was about to take tea. I wonder if you and your friend would care to join me?"

Henrietta's face lifted, deep blue eyes alight. "Oh, we should be delighted!"

He led the way through the growing crowds toward a tea shop just around the corner. "I often stop here while shopping, unless you have somewhere else you prefer?"

"No," she said. "I am still learning my way around Chelsea!"

They stepped into the shop and George chose a table near the window where they could watch the passers-by. Their tea was brought, as well as a plate of scones and cakes. Mrs. Daggett ate hungrily and watched the people going about their business. George had eyes only for Henrietta.

"Have you had a successful outing?" he asked.

"Very—especially since joining forces with you over the wedding presents for our dear friends." She smiled up at him.

"Yes. It pleases me to think that William will be forced to some of the finery he deserves and yet will not claim!"

She laughed. "Eliza, too. She is such a practical little thing that I am quite sure she will continue to make her own clothes even after they are married."

"Luckily, she seems happy to do whatever is necessary. She even has Mrs. Haddely's approval, I understand, and that is saying something!"

"The housekeeper! Oh, my!"

He grinned at her and they fell silent, simply staring at each other.

Henrietta recalled herself with a glance at Mrs. Daggett. "Are you busy with engagements—I mean, parties and such?" She moved quickly past the charged word 'engagement' and in her haste brought more attention to it.

His thick, finely crafted eyebrows lifted as he sipped his tea. "My mother is having a supper party tonight, and I believe there is a ball in a few nights to which we have both been invited."

Henrietta sighed. "Yes, I believe you are correct."

His gaze sharpened quizzically. "Can it be that the indefatigable Miss Darrow has grown tired of social engagements?"

She half-smiled into her cup. "Well, it does take its toll, somewhat. Late

nights and constant dancing and being forever nice and bright...it is tiring.”

“You do not play well to strangers?” he asked softly.

She lifted her face to his. “No, believe it or not.” Her chin came up.

As did his. “Oh, I believe it,” he said, and his eyes dropped to her lips and then back to her eyes. “There is an honesty about you that I have always admired.”

They fell silent, lost in each other’s eyes once more.

Mrs. Daggett was forgotten...until she broke into their thoughts with, “Oh, Miss Henrietta, look at that!”

Their expressions widened as they both turned to see. A rather scruffy child of about six was in the grip of a barrowman and the child was struggling mightily against the man’s clutches. The man’s hand came down upon the child and George suddenly rose and left the shop. They watched through the window as he strode swiftly over to where the man was struggling with the boy who suddenly broke free, only to be captured with an arm around the waist by George.

“Here, here, settle down and let’s figure this out!”

The boy kicked and caught George on the shin once or twice.

“Tha’ bra’ stole an apple from me car’!” the man shouted.

“Did not!” the child shouted.

“Wha’s this, then?” He held up an apple with a bite taken from it.

With one arm around the struggling child, George dug into his pocket and fished out a coin, flipping it to the fruit barrowman. Then he took the bitten apple and handed it to the child.

“Here, and here.” He handed him a coin as well. “Get yourself something to eat.”

The boy grabbed both the apple and the coin and ran off into the crowd without another word or a backward glance. George returned to the shop, brushing his clothes off carefully.

“Oh, Mr. Strathom, are you injured?” Mrs. Daggett fussed.

“Little...er, boy, caught me in the shin a few times. Nothing to speak of, though.”

Henrietta used her napkin to brush at a smudge on George’s vest. After a moment, he took it from her and finished the job, smiling gently at her.

“Well,” Henrietta said, “Mrs. Daggett, I fear we must return home. Thank you so much for the tea, Mr. Strathom.”

He stood as they rose to leave. “My pleasure, Miss Darrow.”

He escorted them from the shop, then watched them make their way back up the street to where their carriage sat waiting. Henrietta glanced back once at him, lifted a hand as her eyes met his. Then she turned away, fighting the feeling that persisted.

She stepped into the carriage, pleased at all they had accomplished in such a short time. Her father would be happy to have the horses back so soon, and her mother would undoubtedly approve of the bonnet and dress when they

arrived. She tried not to think of George, but the memory of how he had handled the beggar child continued intruding in her mind, especially as Mrs. Daggett kept fluttering on about it!

“So manly, and kind! Just think, he could have ruined that lovely waistcoat! And his shoes! He very nearly stepped in—”

“Yes, Helen. It was very good of him. But it was exactly what I have come to expect of Mr. George Strathom.”

Chapter Six

George came down the steps and glanced over at the clock in the entryway. His mother was standing in the main parlor, her fingers busy worrying a curl by her ear. He frowned at the uncharacteristic fidgeting. She was pacing slowly, fiddling with spills on the mantle and adjusting candlesticks.

He cocked his head as he crossed to her. "Mother?"

She spun around, the train of her gown lifting and swirling slightly. "George!" Her hand settled on her chest. "You startled me."

"I know—you were lost in thought."

"Our guests should be arriving soon." She smoothed her pale turquoise gown and the scant lace that edged her bosom.

George frowned slightly—the style was a little young for her. But then he realized that his mother was not much above forty, and that in many circles that was certainly not old.

The bell rang, and they arranged themselves to welcome their guests.

"Mr. Vansittart and Miss Saunders."

Remy Vansittart had once been an active man and still exhibited the remnants of his youth. Tall and in his early fifties, graying slightly at the temples, and only a little leaning toward the embonpoint. He carried himself well and with confidence, and George noted that he lingered over Delia's hand and that she practically simpered. He turned his attention to Miss Saunders and greeted her.

She was short, cursed with a stocky frame that did not suit the current fashion of high-waisted empire gowns. Still, she had made the best of it with simple puffed sleeves that helped her shoulders appear smaller and distracted from her unfashionably large bust. Her gown was an intriguing shade of chartreuse, and it suited her.

George was treated to a hearty handshake from Mr. Vansittart, and then the Haldanes were announced, followed by the Sheltons—both longtime acquaintances.

"I understand we are to wish William joy!" Mr. Shelton said in his hearty way.

Delia acknowledged it, smiling for all the world as though she was

pleased. "Yes. We are delighted," she said with an artificial lilt to her voice. "Unfortunately, I will not be able to attend the wedding. George, however, will take our gifts and wishes down to them."

Mrs. Haldane gestured to Miss Saunders' gown. "My dear, that gown is delightful. Where did you get it?"

One corner of Miss Saunders' mouth lifted, and she said, "A little shop on King's Road."

"You must give me the name of the dressmaker."

"Gladly. Me."

Mrs. Haldane's eyes flew wide open and she drew back for a moment. "You? You're the dressmaker?"

"Indeed. Why should you be surprised? My father left me rather badly off, and so I must make my own way in the world."

Mrs. Haldane was joined by Mrs. Shelton and Delia.

"Well, Chelsea is certainly better dressed as a result," Delia said.

Miss Saunders nodded graciously. "Thank you, Lady Strathom." She cocked her head to one side and continued, "In fact, I had a young client this morning—a Miss Darrow, daughter of the Viscount of Loughton."

George's head shot up.

"Beautiful creature, she bought one of my gowns. It will look lovely on her—but then, almost anything would."

"We are well acquainted with the Loughtons. Our family estate is in the same village—Lytechley."

"I was not aware of that! I hope I did not speak out of turn."

"No one can deny that Miss Darrow is a lovely young woman," George said. "I don't believe anyone could take offense at what you said."

She smiled. "I am glad of that. It doesn't do a businesswoman any good to offend potential customers."

Remy clapped a hand on her shoulder. "Now, Jemima, this isn't the time or place."

"Uncle, anywhere is the time and place."

"We get you married off and you won't have to work."

"I enjoy my work and would hope my future husband would allow me to continue." She stood to her full height and with her shoulders squared.

George lifted his glass to her. "Well, Miss Saunders, I pity the man who endeavors to forbid you!" he said with a bow. "And if he had sense, he would throw all his support behind you and your formidable talent!"

She smiled at him in real gratitude, and he nodded back, happy for this one tenuous link with Henrietta. "I thought I passed a small shop on my way to the silversmiths today on King's Road. Was that yours?"

"Indeed, yes. And that is where Miss Darrow found me. I took down her address to send her parcels to...a Radford House, which I believe is near here." Her gaze fixed on George whenever Henrietta's name was mentioned.

He went a little red under her scrutiny and said rather hurriedly, "It is,

yes. She has exquisite taste. I can think of no better mark of your talent than her favor."

Miss Saunders smiled then and had her answer in the way his expression faltered ever so slightly upon pronouncing Henrietta's name. She took a sip from her glass and considered George carefully. He avoided her gaze and seemed relieved when they were called to make up a card table.

The evening passed equably, supper was enjoyed and many pleasant hands of Whist and Speculation were played and won. George, however, did his best to avoid Miss Saunders throughout the evening. She was just a little too penetrating for his current state of heart.

Delia seemed always at Mr. Vansittart's side. By the end of the evening, George was beginning to suspect that the older man was courting his mother. He did not know how the thought made him feel, but it was an unsettling concept. He made a point of trying to talk with him.

"What is it you do?" he asked during a break in the card playing.

"I am in cotton," he said proudly. "I own two textile mills and we also import from India."

George was somewhat taken aback. His mother had normally been indifferent to trade, thinking it somewhat beneath them. But here she was allowing the attentions of a man in trade and encouraging George to be pleasant to the man's working-class niece. He was at a loss—unless his dear mother was driven by money, which he certainly hoped was not the case.

"Where are your mills?"

"Hertfordshire, but I also have a home here in London."

"I see. No doubt you visit your mills frequently."

"Yes, I have a house there as well. I must visit to meet with my managers and oversee the financial side of things. Large purchases of equipment, etc."

"Of course," George said, intrigued.

"And you? Do you have employment?" Remy asked with an intense look.

George shifted in his seat. "Not as of yet, no. I have discussed going into the Army with my brother, however."

"Good man, no sense sitting around playing the gentleman, is there? What with a war looming and all."

"Er, no, I suppose not. You think it will come to that?"

Remy nodded and frowned into his glass. "I do. I can see the way the Americans are thinking already with the way cotton shipments are going."

George was taken aback. It had never occurred to him that business ventures would be so connected to the political. They discussed the matter a bit more, until they were recalled to their tables to begin another hand.

He found himself paired with Miss Saunders and was hard put to keep the conversation steered away from Henrietta. Miss Saunders was very adroit in her ability to find the smallest connection to that young lady and seemed to delight in the effect it had on George.

George was relieved when Miss Saunders declared herself ready to leave and the evening essentially came to an end.

Once their guests had departed, George turned to his mother. "Where did you meet Vansittart?"

"Oh, just at a supper party." Delia fluttered a hand vaguely.

"When?" George persisted.

"It must have been two or three months ago...perhaps when you went to visit your brother."

"You haven't said anything..."

She shrugged elaborately and waved her hand again. "There was—is—nothing to say. I enjoy his company. I thought you would enjoy his niece's company. I can see, though, she is a little hard-boiled for you."

George laughed. "Rather, I am not soft-boiled enough for her. The woman is a force to be reckoned with. I do not doubt that she will be successful."

"Remy is very desirous that she marry. Naturally, knowing your situation, I thought of you. Tonight, though, was the first I met her, and she is not at all your type."

Before he could stop himself, he asked, "Well, what is my type, then?"

Without turning around she said, "Someone rather like Miss Darrow, I should think." She turned then and looked him straight in the eye before continuing on her way up the stairs.

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Henrietta sat at the piano, playing softly as her parents and Mrs. Daggett sat in the parlor. Her father was reading one of the agricultural reports, her mother was working on her tambour frame, and Mrs. Daggett was embroidering.

Henrietta let her fingers play over the keys and let her mind wander. The rare calm and companionable atmosphere was a welcome relief from the nearly continuous bickering. Her finger hit a wrong note and she calmly corrected it but could feel her mother's reaction in the twitch of her mouth and the sudden tension in her shoulders. She finished the piece and then stood to stretch and take a turn about the room.

"Henrietta, you will need to practice more if you ever want to be truly accomplished."

"Yes, Mama." She went to the window and looked out onto the street. She leaned her forehead against the cool glass and sighed silently, her breath fogging the glass.

With her finger, she traced a small heart, then smeared it away. *Is this*, she wondered, *what Eliza felt*? She stared out into the night, willing George to be there, knowing he was not. The pain in her chest was nearly unbearable and she suddenly longed for solitude.

"I am going up to bed, now. Good night."

She excused herself and climbed the stairs to her room. Once there, Hatcher helped her to change into her nightdress and put another piece of coal onto the grate. Then began the slow work of taking her hair down and brushing it out. It fell to her waist, nearly too long for stylish dressing. Hatcher brushed and combed, then braided her hair into two plaits, and pinned these under a nightcap.

Finally, Hatcher left, and Henrietta was alone.

She sat for some time, wrapped in her dressing gown with her feet warm in a pair of knitted slippers. The light from the candle played in flickering shadows around the room, and she laid her head on the pillow and closed her eyes. George Strathom's dark eyes bore into hers, teasing her with their humorous light.

With a sigh of impatience, she sat up and went to her drawing supplies and pulled out a board, removed the paper that was taped there, and carefully taped a new sheet in place. Then, she selected a pencil and began to sketch.

It was easy to get the roughly rectangular shape of his face and the heavy, but well-crafted, eyebrows. The spring of his dark hair against his forehead, so often creased in concern or in laughter. His eyes, this was the tricky part—how to express those eyes? She did her best, rubbing out the faint lines and redrawing them several times. His nose—straight and no-nonsense, mouth firm and likewise, but with a tendency to turn up at one corner as though he was laughing at some private joke.

It was late, or rather quite early, when she set it aside, reasonably satisfied. She looked around—where to put it so that prying eyes would not see it?

Finally, she stood and carried it to the wardrobe and peered behind it. Sure enough, there was a gap between the wall and the back of it. She carefully slipped the board and its drawing behind the wardrobe, leaving a slight edge so that she could recover it in the future. Then, she moved three hatboxes until they were stacked in the corner, hiding the edge of her picture. Hatcher would think she had decided to reorganize. Adding to the illusion, she took her favorite parasol and leaned it up against the opposite corner.

This time, when she lay down, she fell fast asleep.

Chapter Seven

Henrietta turned to assess herself in the mirror. She was wearing her new gown made by Miss Saunders and the rose color brought the same tone to her cheeks and turned her pale skin slightly golden. Her hair had been curled and dressed in ivory ribbons and the string of tiny pearls set it off perfectly. She waited for Hatcher to hold up her ivory pelisse so that she could slip her arms into it. Buttons, and then done—downstairs to the waiting carriage.

They crossed Chelsea into Kensington and finally pulled up before Herndon Hall. The liveried footman placed the step stool and helped her down. It was but a short walk to the large double doors.

The manor house rose above them looking quite grand—pure white with colonnades and a second-floor terrace. Her mother walked a step ahead of her and was greeted at the door, then they were led into a large parlor with just the right amount of afternoon light filtering in through the windows.

Lady Cassandra Martinet, the Earl of Medlows' daughter, stood ready to welcome them beside her mother, Lady Medlows. Lady Cassandra was tall, not overtly thin, and attractive if not beautiful. Her hair was thick, full, dark brown, and fell in glossy curls. She was all in white and palest blue, with an exquisite necklace of pale sapphires set in gold. Henrietta thought her dressed rather fine for an afternoon tea but could not help admiring the effect.

She stared at Henrietta with a smile that did not go all the way to her eyes and the two girls curtsied to one another. Henrietta felt herself in the presence of a force to be reckoned with and wondered what there was to be so forceful about!

It soon became obvious that the afternoon was a chance for the main players in the Season's offerings to size each other up. The chaperones visited politely, while the girls were quickly evaluated, and their stock taken by all present. Henrietta, a mere viscount's daughter, found herself rather farther back in the running judging by the amount of time she was encouraged to speak, which was less than about half of the other girls.

At some point, she found herself sitting next to Miss Abernethy. She, the granddaughter of a Marquess, seemed to fall in the same stratum as Henrietta and was as much above notice, as below it. Miss Abernethy commented on Henrietta's gown.

“Thank you! I found this wonderful shop on King’s Road and am absolutely in love with it. I bought a bonnet there as well, and it is just perfect.”

“Oh! So few dressmakers really understand bonnets, and the milliners seem devoted to hats alone,” Miss Abernethy said.

“Indeed, our bonnets do seem to fall in between, don’t they!”

“What is the name of this shop?” Miss Abernethy asked eagerly.

“I cannot recall—but I can write you and let you know if you like,” Henrietta said.

“Oh, please do!”

“Are you a horsewoman, Miss Abernethy?” Henrietta asked.

“Yes! But I rarely get to go out, we are kept so busy,” she said ruefully.

“I know, but I am dying to try Hyde Park.”

“Perhaps we could take it in together?” Miss Abernethy replied in a rush.

“That is just what I was going to suggest.”

They were interrupted at that point to go in to tea. There, it was clear, their manners and deportment were judged by all the chaperones and young ladies present. Each one was assessing the others by their own abilities to determine where they stood in the running for the Season.

Henrietta knew she looked well and had been groomed with excellent manners. Miss Abernethy, she noticed, had a slight tremor belied by the teacup in her hand. Her lovely dark eyes were tense beneath the scrutiny, and Henrietta felt for her. One benefit, she thought, of having a strict mother was that she was used to scrutiny and criticism.

She glanced toward Lady Cassandra and was perversely pleased to catch her in the act of nearly dropping her fork. Henrietta smiled into her biscuit, then caught Miss Abernethy’s eye and winked, earning a slight smile in return.

By the time it was done, Henrietta was exhausted with the effort it took to maintain her good manners. But, she counted the formation of a new friend as an event worth noting.

Her mother had a different take on the afternoon, having taken the time to discover as much about the other girls’ dowries and accomplishments as she could.

“Lady Cassandra herself has forty-thousand pounds. Lady Violet has forty-five. She is not much to look at, though I understand she is quite accomplished at the piano and has the voice of an angel. No doubt we will hear her sometime. I am wondering if perhaps your father can settle more upon you, that would help you rise in the ranks somewhat.”

“Surely, Mama, Papa has settled what he can. I would rather a man want me despite the money my father is willing to pay.”

“Oh, Henrietta, don’t talk so!” Lady Loughton scolded, then continued in her assessment, “Now, Lady Cassandra is known for the harp, which is a formidable talent. You must practice more at the piano—that is why we took

this house!”

Henrietta sat, resting her head on the back of the seat as her mother detailed her findings. “Yes, Mama. I have been practicing.”

“Your voice, though, you need to sing as well. You have a good voice if you watch the key you begin in and don’t get breathy.”

“Yes, Mama.”

“Was that the Abernethy girl I saw you sitting beside?”

“Yes, Mama. She and I are thinking of riding Hyde Park.”

“Oh! That will be excellent! I can attend as well. I have my new riding habit, though it is nothing to yours, of course. Still, I must look the part. We should plan it soon—I will check the calendar when we get home and perhaps you can write to Miss Abernethy a proposed date and time.” She seemed delighted at the prospect.

“I would like that. I have missed my outdoor exercise. And Lord Tymonds mentioned riding Hyde Park...although he called it ‘Rotten Row.’”

“That sounds vulgar, and remember it is Lord Charles Tymonds, not Lord Tymonds.”

Henrietta sighed. “Yes, of course.”

The carriage pulled up to Radford House and Henrietta gratefully followed her mother into the house. She excused herself and went to her room to check the label on her bonnet. She hesitated a moment, then pulled out the portrait to glance over it briefly. Her fingers traced the lines of George’s face, then she quickly returned it to its place behind the wardrobe and went downstairs.

“Mama...I was about to write a note to Miss Abernethy. What days am I free to ride Hyde Park?”

She heard her mother turn a page, and then she said, “Tuesday next is free. After that, Friday.”

Henrietta sat at the desk and selected a quill. The paper was already cut, and she had only to pen a few short lines telling Augusta the name of the dress shop and suggesting a day to ride together. Then, after it was folded and sealed, she wrote a careful note of thanks to Lady Cassandra. Both letters were put into the entryway to go out with the rest.

Finally, she made her way to the parlor to practice the piano where she played rather musingly, thinking about George.

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The carriage pulled up in front of Lincoln House and George followed his mother out the door and down the short path to the edge of the street. He waited as she was helped in, then climbed in as well. He sat gingerly, careful of the creases in his pants.

He sighed lightly before asking, “Who are these people again?”

“Distant relatives of Remy’s. He thought we might enjoy an afternoon tea. They have a daughter...”

“Ah. I see.”

“You needn’t say it like that.”

“How am I supposed to express the sudden knowledge that I am being set up?”

“It’s nothing like that. You need to marry, and there are girls aplenty this Season. Why not meet one or two?”

“That is why I have been going to balls and festivities these past few weeks.”

Delia huffed and turned away to stare out the window. George balanced in the rocking carriage as they traversed the city streets toward their goal. Dover House rose up on the right, its white paint reflecting the dull sunlight. A murmur of starlings obscured the sun for a moment, then undulated out of sight.

They were presented and welcomed and found that Remy was already there. His face lit up at the sight of Delia in her pale pink gown and he rose to come toward her. George endured an introduction to Augusta, whom he recognized from Hyde Park and one or two balls.

He bowed low over her hand, eyebrows raised as he asked, “Any problems with runaway horses lately?”

She went red and bit her lip, then released it with a glance at her mother. “No, sir. All has been well.”

“I am glad to hear it.”

He was not surprised to find that he had been seated next to Augusta and sighed internally at the not-so-obvious pairing. Though she was a sweet girl, no one could eclipse Henrietta.

“I have not seen you riding of late,” she said in her pleasantly low voice.

“No. I have taken the gig out on occasion, but have not had much time to ride.”

“A gig sounds lovely. I have been in a barouche before, when we stayed with my uncle in the country. We drove around the countryside and had a picnic.”

“I often ride over the moors when I visit my brother at his estate. I believe you know Miss Darrow—her father’s estate is near there and we have ridden together.”

“Oh yes—I know Miss Darrow! Such a lovely girl. We are to ride together next week.”

“She is an adventurous horsewoman! I wonder that she will be satisfied with tame town riding.”

Augusta chuckled, and George noted the satisfied expression on his mother’s face just before she turned away to nod at something Mr. Abernethy said. George felt his own expression harden somewhat as he turned back to Augusta, catching the last of her words.

“...and so I thought I would invite him as well, but he cannot go, it seems, so that is all for the best.”

“Who? I’m sorry, I did not catch what you said.”

“My cousin, Cecil D’Courcy. He is very desirous of meeting again with Miss Darrow to offer his apologies, but he is busy the day we are set to ride.”

“Probably for the best. I believe it was he that spooked your horse that day.”

“Oh yes, and I can never thank you enough for saving me.”

“Nonsense, do not think I brought it up as an inducement to your gratitude. I merely think that things go better when Mr. D’Courcy is out of the picture.”

“Hmm. You may be right. But he was such a splendid boy!”

At this point, George’s attention was called away by Mrs. Abernethy who said in an undertone, “I must thank you as well for your efforts at catching Augusta’s horse. She is an excellent horsewoman, but was completely caught off guard.”

“I could see that. She had done everything she could to calm the horse, but D’Courcy would not let up.”

He turned back to Augusta, who was now talking with Remy. Mrs. Abernethy busied herself filling teacups and pressing sandwiches on reluctant guests. George himself took another and caught his mother’s eye. He winked at her, causing her to flash him an expression of disapproval. He was relieved when their carriage was finally called and they could rise to take their leave.

He found Augusta holding out her hand to him and he bent low over it once more as he said goodbye. As he escaped into the fresh air, he fought rushing to the waiting carriage and the freedom it represented. Forced to wait until his mother was settled, he fidgeted slightly before slumping into his seat with a sigh.

Glancing up, he caught his mother’s stern expression and said, “I did my best, Mother. You can’t deny that.”

“I take it Miss Abernethy is not up to your standards?”

“She is an excellent girl.”

“But...?”

“But she is not for me.”

Delia sat regarding him for a moment. Then her head tilted slightly to one side and she said, “Are you sure, George? Miss Darrow will not be allowed to accept you, should you even ask.”

George felt the heat rise in his face as he turned away and clenched one hand. He said nothing, and his mother allowed him his silence for the rest of the journey.

Chapter Eight

The morning was bright, cool, and clear. Henrietta wore her new riding habit of dark periwinkle and matching hat. Miss Abernethy was in a deep, dark green, her hair glinting coppery gold in the sunlight beneath her own modish top hat. Their chaperones sat on the benches, watching from a distance as the two girls walked their horses sedately amidst the other riders. Suddenly, two horses cantered sideways in front of them, and they found themselves hailed with flourishes of top hats by two gentlemen.

“Cecil!” Augusta protested, steadying her horse who had been caught unawares. “Think what Papa would say! Remember what happened last time!”

His black eyes flashed wickedly at her and he said, “And there is no Strathom to rescue you this time.” He turned to Henrietta and said, “Pray excuse us, we were afraid we would lose you in the crowd and so rushed on. I hope your horse is not incommoded?”

“Not at all,” she answered. “Would you care to join us, Mr. D’Courcy, and...?”

Cecil’s eyebrows shot up, “Oh! Forgive me, ladies! Miss Henrietta Darrow, my friend Oscar Ford.”

Heads nodded round, and the four turned their horses to fall into step as they traced the park around.

“I thought you would not be here today, Cecil,” Augusta said.

“My schedule opened up and I thought I would join you. I say, Miss Darrow, are you joining our dear Augusta at the Blemonds’ ‘do’ this Thursday?”

“Bit early for Blemonds to be having a ball, isn’t it?” Mr. Ford said.

“Season seems to have started early this year,” Cecil replied. “No sport, don’t you know?”

“Ah. I wondered why the town is crowded so early,” Mr. Ford said.

“So, Madam, answer us if you please!” Cecil said.

Henrietta was taken aback, but answered, “Indeed, I will be there.”

“Miss Darrow!” A familiar voice called gently out from behind them.

Henrietta twisted in her seat, heart fluttering in her chest. George Strathom was astride a rather leggy bay with a magnificent tail, and he was

heading their way.

“Mr. Strathom!” Henrietta said, and her eyes lit up.

“I had no idea you took in the ‘Row’!” he said with a smile.

“Miss Abernethy and I are here for the first time.”

“Ah! Amazing to have this here in the middle of London. Almost as much fun as our romps across the country in Lytchley.”

She added, “Unfortunately, there is no chasing fences here!”

He chuckled. “No. Very sedate riding for you!” He turned to Miss Abernethy and added, “You look very well this morning, Miss Abernethy!”

“Thank you, Mr. Strathom. Have you been riding long this morning?”

“Yes, I was just about to head home. But perhaps I should stay to make sure your horse doesn’t run off again?” He grinned gently, and Augusta blushed.

“No, sir, I think my cousin is better behaved today.”

“That is excellent news,” he said.

“Pray, what is this?” Henrietta asked.

Augusta began to explain, and George hung back somewhat modestly. Augusta finished the tale and Henrietta tilted her head toward George.

D’Courcy chose that moment to cut in between him and the girls. “Well, we will not detain you longer, then, Strathom. If you will excuse us.”

He deftly reined his horse around and the other horses made to follow, except for Henrietta. She turned back toward George uncertainly.

He smiled again and said, “I hope to see you soon, Miss Darrow. Goodbye.” He guided his horse to one side and trotted off the green.

The four remaining riders continued on, but Henrietta was much lost in thought and missed most of what was said. By the time she was aware of the conversation, it seemed to have turned to some debate about hairstyles between the two young men.

She glanced over at Augusta, who rolled her eyes as the discussion grew more heated with Ford declaring the Titus to be more suitable and Cecil baiting him with taunts. Both seemed intent upon showing off their horsemanship as they guided their horses in figure eights in front of the girls while they argued.

Henrietta felt the morning had become nearly interminable before they had finished the circuit and the two young men caught sight of some acquaintances they wished to catch up with. They raced off with more abandon than finesse.

Henrietta and Augusta were finally left to themselves. They rode in happy silence for some time, then chatted quietly.

Augusta then said, “I learned a few days ago that you were previously acquainted with Mr. George Strathom.”

“Yes. His family’s estate lies near ours in Lytchley, farther north. His brother is set to marry one of my good friends, who is also a distant relative.”

“Oh! Is it a love match?” she asked eagerly.

Henrietta expression softened. "Very much so! Eliza deserves no less."

"No more than any other woman, surely," she said diffidently.

Henrietta's smile faded. "What we deserve and what we will get are often very different things."

"It is indeed, so," said Augusta. "Despite the unhappiness that often accompanies such loveless pairings. You would think that those trapped in such marriages would seek better for their children."

Henrietta thought for a moment. "Yet, they seem to have forgotten. At least, my mother seems to have forgotten and is only intent upon me making a wonderful match."

"Mine as well. She keeps urging Father to settle more money on me—I think she believes it will entice more deserving young men out of the woodwork to declare for me!" She reached up to tuck a wayward lock back underneath her hat. "It won't change the fact that I am plain and plump, and that my figure is out of fashion."

"You disparage yourself too meanly. You forget your heavenly eyes and perfect skin!" Henrietta said.

Augusta went very pink at the praise. "You need not worry about your appearance, though."

Henrietta sighed. "Perhaps not, but I am constantly being urged to practice my piano. I suppose eligible young men consider prowess at that instrument necessary for marital happiness."

Both girls giggled.

"Oh! My mother and I visited that dress shop on King's Road. We ordered a dress and a spencer. I found a bonnet, but Mother would not let me get it. Apparently, it was the wrong color for me."

"Sometimes what my mother thinks is a wrong color and what I think is a right color are the same thing." Henrietta adjusted her reins and twitched her skirt.

Augusta chuckled. "Yes, Mother and I do not think very alike."

"How is Mr. D'Courcy related to you?"

"Oh, he is the son of Father's favorite, but much younger, aunt."

"And his estate?" she asked curiously.

"Cecil has no estate as of yet. He is set to inherit on the D'Courcy side, but then there may not be much money, only a knighthood."

"Ah, so he must make his way as best he can."

"I suppose so. It seems a rather beastly enterprise."

Henrietta could only nod, thinking how the social machine seemed to sort them all according to their monetary value.

Their ride ended with both girls desirous to prolong their acquaintance—no small victory! They parted with real sorrow, each feeling a little less lonely and a little less likely to be swallowed up whole by the great city.

Chapter Nine

The Wendleshams were a quiet couple who had taken a house near the Loughtons. They were hosting an evening party to introduce their niece, Wilhelmina, into society. Several young ladies and eligible young men, including George, were in attendance, as well as some older friends of the Wendleshams.

Henrietta found that Willie, as she was called by her aunt, was so shy as to be frightened to incomprehensibility by the demands of the party. Henrietta pitied her, but was unable to help the poor girl who was called upon to play the piano during supper. Her fingers were shaking so badly that it was a wonder she was able to play at all. The relief was palpable when she finished, and another girl took her turn and played a very pretty piece and sang in a tolerable voice. Then it was Henrietta's turn.

She played with more true feeling than the other two girls, and her voice rose in harmony with the instrument. There was heartfelt clapping when she finished, despite having struck one wrong chord. She had particularly noticed George's mouth crook upwards when her finger had misplayed the note and had smiled to herself. One person, at least, could look kindly on her imperfections.

Her mother, however, could not, and quickly took her to task in a whispered undertone as another girl rose to entertain the company.

"Lord Charles heard that!" she whispered.

"Everyone heard it, Mama." Henrietta strove to keep her eyes on the new performer.

Her mother's voice was harsh and low in her ear. "I cannot emphasize enough the importance of perfection in these things. You must shine brighter than the competition!"

"I can only shine so bright, Mama," she said tightly, her throat constricting.

Her mother merely held up a hand, indicating the conversation was over.

Henrietta excused herself and walked away until she reached the French doors that led to the tiny garden with its little fountain. She could still hear the poor girl inside struggling to complete her song in the same key that she had started, and for some reason it caused tears to brim in her eyes.

Suddenly, a shadow appeared on the path and she glanced up to see George.

“Mr. Strathom!” She dabbed the back of her hands against her eyes.

“Miss Darrow,” he said gently.

He frowned and offered his arm, which she took after a slight hesitation. They walked for a moment without speaking then paused by the fountain, and when he looked down at her he noted the telltale trails of tears.

He turned away, but said, “Miss Darrow, if I can be of any assistance...” He held out a handkerchief, which she accepted and dabbed at her face.

“You already have. Thank you.” Her voice was tight with emotion.

“Of course.”

She sniffled delicately and then burst out, “It is just so beastly.”

“What is?”

“This whole thing. The Season. I am not enjoying myself, Mr. Strathom.”

He felt helpless, but he let his hand rest on hers where it still lay on his arm for a moment. Suddenly, he turned to her and lifted her face to his with one hand. His other gently circled her waist and his lips came down to touch hers ever so gently, then with more pressure and urgency as her mouth yielded to his. Her arms twined about his neck and for a moment they were lost.

They stood, thus, for a moment before he broke off. His thumb wiped away the tear that had stalled in the corner of her eye.

“Marry me, then, and be done with all this. I can give you a home in town, and a twenty-year-old carriage. And a gig.”

She smiled up at him. “We can’t forget the gig.”

“No”—he said softly—“we cannot.”

Her eyes shone up at him and his heart leapt. Then the light faded, and she pulled back. He saw her glance toward the window and the music filtering out as her mind went instantly to the impossible—asking her parents’ permission.

“I will go to them, I can convince them,” he said in an uncharacteristic rush.

“No!” Her hand came up to his chest. “No...you can’t. I know what they will say.”

“Marry me anyway. They cannot actually stop us.”

“And go against them? My parents? I...I can’t. Please understand.”

He released her then, and half turned away. He swung back toward her and said in a low growl, “You would go against your own heart—I know you love me. You cannot deny this.”

“I don’t. I don’t deny anything. But I can’t do this.”

He looked away and shoved one hand through his hair roughly. His eyes closed for a moment, then opened as he turned slowly back to her. She stood in the starlight, eyes glittering anew.

His voice was low, but hard, as he said, “Please accept my best wishes

for your future happiness, with whomever wins your heart and the acceptance of your parents' wishes."

"George, please."

He paused for a moment, then strode away before she realized that she had called him by his Christian name.

Henrietta sat down on the edge of the fountain, clutching his handkerchief to her eyes, and struggling to stop the tears from falling. "Oh, Lord, what have I done!" she cried softly.

"Henrietta! For shame, girl, whatever are you doing out here?" Her mother strode up to her side. "What is all this? I saw Mr. George Strathom out here—what is going on?"

Henrietta stood and smoothed her dress with one hand, wiping her eyes with the other. "Nothing, Mama. Nothing."

Her eyes grew wide as she perceived her daughter's state. "He didn't... he didn't..."

"Didn't what, Mama?" She stared straight at her mother.

"Did he declare himself?" she asked anxiously.

"And if he did?" Henrietta's chin came up.

"I will not have it! Do you hear me?!" Her voice rose in a shrill whisper.

"I refused him. There, you should be content." Henrietta's hand clenched around the handkerchief.

Lady Loughton fanned herself with one hand while the other rested on her ample bosom. "Well, thank goodness for that, at least. You have some sense. Though not enough to keep from wandering the garden with him."

Henrietta wiped her face and said, "Mama, I would like to go home."

Lady Loughton lifted Henrietta's face and examined it critically. "Yes, perhaps it would be best. Lord Charles should not see you like this. I will go make our apologies and have the carriage called."

She bustled off, leaving Henrietta to sit once again.

"Oh, George," she whispered.

With a sigh, she rose to find her way to the front steps where her mother and the carriage were waiting. Her mother was silent for most of the journey and Henrietta was able to compose herself. Once home, they climbed the stairs and found Lord Loughton with spectacles on his eyes and a book in his hand.

He looked quizzically from them to the clock on the mantle over the cozy fire. "A bit early for you, isn't it?"

"Your daughter received a proposal," Lady Loughton said stiffly.

"I say! That's..."

"From Mr. George Strathom," she added.

His expression fell and he slowly closed his book. "Henrietta, you know I admire the Strathoms, however..."

Lady Loughton cut him off with a decisive sweep of her hand. "There is no need of that, she had the sense to refuse him outright. However, she is a bit

done for and so we came home.” She pulled off her gloves and slapped them against her palm.

“I see. Well”—he tried to force some cheer into his voice—“perhaps an early night will set you right, eh?”

“Yes, Papa.” She kissed him dutifully and climbed the stairs to her room.

Hatcher came and silently helped her undress and slip into her nightdress. Her hair was taken down and plaited, then pinned under her lacy nightcap. Then Hatcher gathered the divested clothing and left without a word.

Henrietta sat for several moments after her maid left, then retrieved the drawing she had done from behind the wardrobe. She curled onto her bed, holding it in front of her, and remembered the hurt in those eyes when she had pulled back. Her tears fell silently once again.

This was a different pain. It was no longer a game in which she was playing at being in love. This was harsh and real, agonizingly real. She loved George and could not have him.

She cried, silently, long into the night.

Chapter Ten

It was nearing Easter, and the time for William and Eliza's wedding had arrived. George stood waiting for the hired cab to pick him up and take him to the mail coach. He knew that Henrietta would also be making the journey and he tried to shut his mind to the thought. He had not seen her since his proposal, though the memory of their kiss was never far from his thoughts.

It was a difficult, rainy trip that lasted almost three days. The coach even became stuck in the mud at one point. He was obliged to get out and put his shoulder to the coach with the other gentlemen and help free it from the deep ruts it had fallen into. He was grim-faced with discomfort by the time he arrived in Lytchley and hoped that William's valet, Leavitt, would be able to get his shoes and his clothing cleaned up!

George very gratefully availed himself of the bath that was readied for him and relished the feel of clean clothes upon his person. Leavitt came in shortly after to retrieve his clothing.

"I am sorry, Leavitt," George said.

"Not to worry, sir. Nothing a good brushing and wash won't fix."

George did his best to ensure that his brother would not guess his secret. And yet, he was quiet and withdrawn, something that William could not help but notice. Gone was the typical banter, and George often sat silently brooding for hours on end.

It was late on the second day of his visit, two nights before the wedding, when William broached the subject. "Well, George, and what is wrong?"

George's head snapped to his brother. "I don't know what you mean."

"I think you do." William looked evenly at him.

George sighed. "And if I refuse to talk?"

"Then I will respect that."

He was silent for so long that William feared he would do just that. Then, he said suddenly, "I envy you, William."

Whatever he had expected, it was not this. His eyebrows rose. "Whatever for? Not the title...?"

George laughed shortly. "If it would have helped, then yes, I would envy you that. I asked for Miss Darrow's hand."

William's eyes grew large, and he considered him in silence.

George nodded. "Yes, you can imagine how she responded."

"No, I know she cares for you, but..."

"Yes. She found herself unable to accept."

"George..."

"Please don't! Don't pity me. Not that, William." George pushed off from the chair and stood.

"I don't pity you," William said. "I feel for you. I can empathize with that particular pain."

George's face lifted. There was much of his brother's courtship that he still did not know. The thought of William experiencing something of the pain he felt was comforting, somehow.

He half-smiled. "Thank you, brother." He sat down again and said, "And how are preparations for your happiness going?"

"I shall be happy when it is done. The preparations seem endless. Haddley took me to task over something to do with the cake."

"What on earth should you have to do with the cake?"

"That was the sum of her taking me to task. That I had done nothing about the cake. How, she wondered, was there going to be one if I did not order the kitchen to prepare one?"

"Why, I should have responded, did she not order it herself?"

"Apparently, this is something the bride's family takes care of and in this case..."

"Ah. Yes. I can't imagine Uncle Enger even remembering that there is such a thing as a cake."

"No, and I certainly hadn't considered it. But there it is, all baked and powdered or whatever they do. Cook is happy, Haddley is...Haddley. Whatever passes for happiness with Haddley."

The corner of George's mouth twitched upward. "And you are settled in the lord's bedchamber?"

William grimaced. "Well, Leavitt has moved my things in there, but it seems strange to be in Father's room."

George shivered. "I can only imagine. Is Eliza to have a lady's maid?"

"She says not, but it seems strange for me to have Leavitt and for her to not have a maid. She is supposed to ask Miss Darrow about it. I am hoping she steers her toward someone suitable."

"Next thing will be a nurse..." George grinned.

William blanched, then went red. George burst out laughing and William belatedly joined him.

After a moment, William said hesitantly, "I have a proposal to make."

George looked over at his brother. He was staring into his drink with a peculiar expression.

"Yes?"

"I have been thinking of splitting Father's holdings. His estate, as it were."

“What?” George frowned and leaned forward. “Why in God’s name would you do that?”

“I think it rather a hard thing for one son to have everything and the other not. I want to give you your independence.”

George merely stared in disbelief. Then, he asked, “Can you do that? What would happen to the investments, Tredwell...Lincoln House.”

“That is just it. You would keep Lincoln House, I keep Tredwell. We would divide the investments so each of us has what we need to maintain our separate properties.”

“The risk...”

“I know. If one investment fails, that brother will have to live with what is left over from the others. Less resilience, but you would have a house and your own income.”

George felt a rush of relief, countered by an overwhelming sense of uncertainty. “Would it work?”

“I have been going over the figures. I thought perhaps we could sit and discuss it more after the wedding.”

“You should talk to Eliza.”

“I have. She agrees.”

“What?!”

William laughed. “It was, in some ways, her suggestion. You can imagine she sympathizes with your situation.”

George stared, unable to comprehend anyone willing to lessen their income for the independence of another.

William smiled and said, “Well, think on it. We’ll talk more later.”

He clapped him on the knee and rose, drained his glass, and set off upstairs. George was left to stare dumbfounded into the fire.

He wondered if that would be the key—if it would make a difference to Henrietta’s family. He was still the second son of a first baronet, but at least he would not be a dependent one. He was up late into the night, thinking.

The day of the wedding was perversely rainy and cold. The occasional snowflake blended with the rain to make it that much more miserable. But the ceremony went smoothly, the congregation rejoicing in the radiance of the bride and the manly glow of her husband.

It was all George could do not to glance Henrietta’s way as the vows were repeated. He felt his throat clench as he watched his brother face the congregation and Mr. Waddell declared them man and wife. He had to turn away for a moment. Then he was smiling along with everyone present, except Lady Loughton who still stared stonily forward as the couple walked by.

Tredwell Abbey was alight with candles and fires as the guests prepared for the wedding breakfast. There was enough food, which caused William to heave a sigh of relief, and the guests stayed just long enough.

George avoided Henrietta as much as possible. Part of him wanted to tell her of his coming financial independence, but part of him was still angry and

hurt that she had refused him.

At one point, however, she ended up forcing his hand.

He was standing by the window and sensed a movement at his side. Turning to look, he noted Henrietta standing there, gazing out the window as well. He nodded to her and turned away, but her voice called him back.

“Mr. Strathom.”

“You once called me George.”

“George, then.”

“I am at your service, Miss Darrow.”

“George, we must find a way to meet each other and be civil.”

“I agree. And I am ready to meet you in civility, or however else it must be.”

She gaze dropped, and the weak sunlight streaming through the clouds fell on her golden head.

His heart skipped a beat, and he relented and said in a gentler voice, “Henrietta...”

Her head lifted, blue eyes met brown and the air fairly crackled between them. She swallowed, and her rosy lips parted. “George, please understand.”

His face hardened at once and he turned away. “You must forgive me, Miss Darrow.”

He stepped away and moved to the front door where he hesitated, looking back over the company, his gaze lingering on Henrietta. He considered her for a moment before opening the door and stepping out into the dismal day, headed toward the stable.

He wandered around, noting the old carriage and the governess cart still lying on its side against the far wall of the carriage house. He went over to it and picked up a piece of the brace that had fallen off and placed it inside the cart. It made him think of the old carriage William still used, the one bought for his father’s first wife. He wondered what would become of it once William ordered a new one for Eliza.

He heard a cough and turned to see Rivers there, rolling up a long length of rope.

“‘Ow’s the chestnut, then?” he asked as he finished and secured it.

“Good. Hermes is doing well in London,” George said proudly.

“Odd sort of name for a ‘orse.” Rivers reached up and hung the rope from a hook.

“Yes, well, it is Greek mythology.”

“‘Ef ‘ee says so.”

“How is your boy doing?” George asked.

“Well, ‘e seems to like law and such.”

“Pity he didn’t take to horses,” George said, looking over the perfectly appointed stable.

“Well, we all ‘ave our gifts. My youngest seems to ‘ave the knack for ‘orses.”

“That is excellent, then.”

George pushed off from the stall door and nodded farewell, intending to return to the house. He passed Henrietta sitting in her carriage, apparently waiting for her parents, who were still talking to William and Eliza.

“Mr. Strathom.”

George paused but did not turn around.

“Please, George,” she said in a strained voice.

He finally turned, and the cold expression on his face nearly sent her into tears again.

“I don’t want us to be enemies.”

He answered slowly, “I am at a loss as to how we can be friends, as we were.”

“Mr. Strathom!” He closed his eyes and turned to greet Lady Loughton. “Perhaps you would care to return to the party—I believe your new sister-in-law would be happy of your company.”

He turned and stalked off without even an attempt at civility, leaving Lady Loughton appearing quite as though she had won a prize. Lord Loughton passed him with a hesitant nod and soon he heard the carriage rattle as it began its journey toward Hadring Hall.

George went inside to find that most of the guests were in the process of leaving. William was having his carriage ferry some of the guests home as soon as they were ready. Luckily, Eliza’s Aunt Gemma and Cousin Jamie lived only a little over three miles away on the road to Stanton and everyone else lived much closer. The servants were silently setting the house to rights and a sense of normalcy was settling over the abbey.

George stood at loose ends, not sure what to do with himself.

It would not do. He went back outside and returned to the stables. He found Rivers in conversation with one of the grooms. He waited until they had finished, then Rivers stepped toward him, still rubbing some oil onto a leather halter.

“Aye?”

“Is there a horse I could ride?”

Rivers twisted to peruse over the entire stable full of horses and then turned back. “Aye.”

“Well, could you have one saddled for me?”

He nodded. “Aye.”

Rivers called over a groom and shouted out some instructions. Within minutes, a horse was brought out, brushed quickly and then saddled and bridled.

George recognized the dapple gray and almost smiled. He knew it was foolish to ride in his plain shoes, but could not face the questions that would arise if he went indoors to change into boots. He would just have to make do.

Once settled in the saddle, he turned the horse’s head toward the west and urged him on.

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On the other side of Lytchley, Henrietta was pressed against the side of the carriage as they turned onto the driveway leading up to Radford. It came to a stop in front of the steps and she waited for her mother to exit the carriage, then followed. She stayed several steps behind her, thinking about her friend. Eliza had looked lovely, truly radiant with joy. Going to her small manor home with the man she loved.

Henrietta felt tears sting her eyes again for what could have been. Even now, had she accepted George, she would have been on the eve of her own wedding.

She lifted her chin. Despite her regrets, she could not see what else she could have done. As her parents' only daughter, duty had been drilled into her since she could walk and talk. The first duty of a young woman was to marry well.

She dropped her head and closed her eyes.

Climbing wearily to her room, she allowed one of the maids, a girl named Minnie, to help her undress. Hatcher had stayed in London for the short trip home as there were plenty at Radford who could assist. She slipped into her dressing gown and curled on the window seat, braving the chill emanating from the iced panes. The fire had taken much of the chill off the air, but the drapes had not yet been drawn and there was nothing holding the warmth in.

She glanced up and climbed onto the window seat, unaware that the firelight and the light from the candles was illuminating her from behind as she stretched upward to grasp the heavy drapes and pull them across.

Chapter Eleven

Out on the lawn, astride William's horse, George watched as Henrietta's form was outlined by the fire for a spare moment before the curtain was drawn across. His heart hammered in his chest, nearly choking him with desire.

With a groan, he swung the horse's head about and charged back toward the abbey. He urged him to a gallop and raced over the fields.

Sometime later, the horse showed up in the stable, limping. It made its way to the stable where the grooms caught it and sent word to Rivers. He immediately alerted William and within minutes, the abbey came alive with men on horseback fanning out in search of the missing George. William called for his mare and without hesitation guided her toward the west. He held a lantern up and rode only as fast as he could see in front of him.

It was William who found him, drawn by instinct along the shortest track from Tredwell to Hadring Hall. On the near side of a low fence, lying in the ditch and barely visible in the dark, lay his brother.

William jumped down from his horse and ran to George's side. He set the lantern down beside him and reached for his face, feeling for a pulse in his neck.

"William, stop that." George batted weakly at his brother's hands.

He was conscious, but dangerously cold and obviously injured. William took off his coat and draped it over his brother's shoulders.

"Come on, let's get you on this horse."

"I don't think I can make it," he groaned.

"It's either that or you walk home," William said.

George gasped as he was hauled to a standing position. "The horse."

William helped him onto the horse and began leading him back home.

"You didn't ask me what happened," George said in a strained, choked voice.

"I think it obvious. You went for a ride and decided to break your neck by taking a fence in the dark."

"It was not my intention to break my neck." George gasped in pain as the horse stumbled briefly and jostled him.

"Was it your intention to break my horse's leg?"

“Is it broken?” George was alarmed.

“No, limping. But dammit, George. This is not like you!”

George focused on breathing for a few minutes.

William lowered his voice as they neared the lights of the yard. “If you must take out your frustrations over Miss Darrow, leave my horses out of it.”

“God help me if I hurt one of your damned horses,” George said tightly.

“God help *me* if I lose my only brother—horses be damned! However, I can’t appeal to you as a father—you don’t belong to me, thus the least I can ask you to do is spare what is mine.”

“I’m sorry, William,” he said contritely.

“Thank you.”

“Your wedding night.”

“Yes.” William’s voice was tight.

“I’m sorry, again.”

A groom rushed forward as they entered the lighted driveway and took the horse from William. George was helped down just as Dr. Welles rode in, Rivers having sent for him just in case.

George was taken straight to his room where a bath was in the process of being filled. Dr. Welles examined him and pronounced three broken ribs and a sprained knee and wrist. The doctor was concerned about the brain and ordered George to be kept in bed until he returned the next day to check on him. He left strict orders to be called if George would not waken or if his vision became impaired.

Eliza stepped in as the doctor left, taking the cloth and wiping George’s brow and neck.

“Eliza, this is a rotten way to start off as brother and sister,” George said, hoarse from pain.

She smiled. “As long as there are no serious injuries...it seems pretty normal to me.”

He tried to chuckle but winced at the stabs of pain from his broken ribs. “I am not sure how to take that.”

“Well, as a brother would from a sister.”

“Well, sister, I am going to have a bath, regardless of what my brother or the good doctor say. So I suggest you retire to your room and await your husband.”

Her eyebrow lifted and she set the compress down. “We will be checking on you through the night to make sure you are truly all right.”

“Surely you have better things to do than worry about me.” The corner of his mouth twitched up despite his ghastly color.

“Family, George, matters most.” She squeezed his hand and stood to leave.

“Eliza,” he said, and she turned. “Thank you.”

Her brows knit together. “For what?”

“For making him happy. I have never known him to be truly happy.”

She smiled. "For that, brother, you are most welcome."

Leavitt entered as she left to help him undress and to get into the bath. It was nearly too much for him, and he blacked out for a few seconds, causing a commotion.

William was called once again and swore. "Dammit, George. Get in bed and stay there!"

George crawled in, helped by the two men and struggling against the vertigo that threatened to throw him into a whirlpool of semiconsciousness. "I am trying, dear brother."

"Call Welles again," William ordered Leavitt.

"No." George waved one hand toward Leavitt. "Just give me a moment." Minutes passed, and finally George was able to open his eyes. "Better."

William considered him for a moment, then said to Leavitt, "Stay with him tonight. Let me know if he relapses."

Leavitt nodded and called for a servant to bring some water.

"William, go to your wife and let me be."

"My wife will just send me back here if I don't bring her a good report of you."

George's breathing became more regular, and he fell into a fitful sleep. William watched him for several minutes, then left with a somewhat worried expression.

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Henrietta came downstairs rather late the next morning. She found the maids gathered together, whispering.

One of them saw her and said, "Excuse me Miss, have you heard about Mr. George Stratham?"

She frowned and alarm seized her. "What has happened?"

"He had an accident on a horse last night. Over the fence down by the Winder road."

"Why on earth would he be riding at night?"

The maids exchanged a glance and shrugged.

"Tell me, was he badly hurt?"

"Dr. Welles fears for his brain—ooo! Maybe he will be an idiot like Sam Dunn!"

Henrietta blanched. "Have my trap brought round. Minnie!" she called and went toward the stairs where her maid suddenly appeared. "My pelisse and my bonnet. Quickly!"

She retrieved her gloves and was waiting when Minnie brought her pelisse and helped her into it, and then settled the bonnet over her hair. Henrietta tied her bonnet strings and went to stand on the front step, waiting. Her slippered foot tapped impatiently until her pony and the trap were brought round. Without a word, she climbed in and chirruped to Marches.

She went rather fast through town, and more than one individual had to

step back from the trap as it pushed through the shoppers. Once at Tredwell, a groom came running to take control of her pony and she swept down from the seat and up the steps to ring the bell. It was answered immediately.

“Please, may I see Lady Strathom? It is urgent!”

She was shown into the main room and left to stand until Eliza stepped purposefully down the staircase toward her.

They clasped hands and Eliza said, “You’ve heard!”

“Yes, please tell me!”

“He left to go riding last night and must have tried to jump a fence. The horse went down and may have rolled on him. We aren’t sure, he can’t remember, but based on his injuries we think so.”

“Injuries! What are they?” Henrietta said, almost panicked.

“Broken ribs, several sprains, but the worst is his brain is not right. He has severe vertigo and difficulty staying awake. Dr. Welles is with him again.”

“Can I see him?”

Eliza’s eyes widened, then turned gentle. “I will see. Sit with me until the doctor is done.”

She led Henrietta, who was shaking, toward the fire and gently helped her free of her pelisse and bonnet. Then she sat her beside the fire. A maid appeared to take Henrietta’s things and Eliza ordered some tea to be brought.

When the tea came, Eliza poured a cup and placed it in Henrietta’s hands. “I am going up to see him and find out what the doctor says. Wait here.”

Henrietta nodded, saying, “I expect you find my concern excessive but...” Henrietta trailed off uncertainly.

“Not at all. I would have done the same.” She smiled and trotted up the stairs, leaving Henrietta alone in the great room.

It was only then that she realized how Eliza must have spent her wedding night. It sobered her, and she sipped her tea for warmth, though it did not seem to reach her heart.

Eliza came back with the doctor, talking quietly, and showed him out. Then she returned to Henrietta and sat beside her.

“Dr. Welles is not alarmed, though he emphasizes quiet. William is getting him settled, and then I will show you up for a few minutes.”

Henrietta pressed her lips together and nodded gratefully. Within a few minutes, William himself came downstairs. Eliza stood to greet him.

“He is resting now,” William said. “Are you sure about this?”

“Of course! Henrietta, come with me. We will keep him calm and quiet.”

The two women went upstairs together, and Eliza led the way to George’s room. She opened the door and ushered Henrietta in. George frowned, then his eyes grew large, and he winced, one hand coming up to rub his temple.

Henrietta went and sat in the chair beside him, reaching for his hand. “Oh, thank Heaven! You look awful!”

He did—deep circles under his eyes, a darkening bruise on his forehead beneath a deep cut. Then the lines of pain etched about his eyes and mouth.

He chuckled shortly. “You came all this way to tell me that?”

“Idiot! The whole town is talking about George Strathom being dashed senseless in a riding accident.”

“Not quite senseless...”

“Senseless to start with! What were you thinking, rushing a fence at night?”

He closed his eyes. When he opened them there was a new pain. He stared into her eyes and said meaningfully, “I was trying to run from unwelcome thoughts.”

She withdrew her hands. “George...”

“Mr. Stratham, Miss Darrow,” he corrected gently. “We must behave with social correctness.”

Her chin lifted. “Well then, Mr. Strathom, I shall leave you now that I see you are not at death’s door.”

He held her hand and did not let her rise just yet. “Perhaps I wish I was, then you might want to stay.”

“Who says I don’t want to stay?” she whispered. “But as you said, social correctness, which I have already erred against.” She pulled her hand free and walked slowly from the room.

Once outside, her pace quickened. She hugged Eliza, slipped into her pelisse and fixed her bonnet. Then she stepped free of the house and into her pony trap, clucking to Marches. She was aware that George could probably see her through his window as she disappeared around the bend in the drive.

As she drove, she began to realize what her actions must have looked like. She had declared herself before her own house staff and one of her best friends. She closed her eyes for a moment. How to explain this to her mother....

Lady Loughton was waiting for her when the pony trap pulled up to the manor house. Henrietta had no sooner stepped over the threshold before she began.

“Where have you been? The maids are all talking about how you rushed off after hearing of George Strathom’s accident.”

“Yes, Mama. I went to see if Eliza and Sir William were all right or if they needed help.”

“You went to see that Strathom!” Lady Loughton was shaking with fury.

“That, too. I was concerned for a friend.”

“Friend! You are not to associate with him any longer. Do you understand me? This behavior will expose you to some very impertinent remarks!” Her bust heaved with indignation.

“For what?” She lifted her chin. “Showing concern for an old friend? Let them make their remarks!” She untied her bonnet and began to shrug out of her pelisse.

“Henrietta.” Her father’s voice sounded behind her and she dropped her head, eyes wide at the tone in his voice. “I must place my concern on the side of your dear mama’s. This was unbecoming of a young lady, and I must beg you to think before acting like this again.”

Henrietta’s heart seemed to stop in her chest. She swallowed against it and managed to say, “Yes, Papa.”

“Thank goodness you refused him. Imagine if you had accepted and then this had happened! You could have been on the verge of marriage to a vegetable!” Lady Loughton said.

“He is not so severely injured as that. Merely dizzy upon standing.”

“Regardless! I count it a blessing we are not connected to them in any way.”

Henrietta could only stare at the ground. After a moment, she added, “May I please go, now?”

Lord Loughton replied gently, “Yes, my dear. But you will not have access to the pony trap or the horses for the remainder of your visit.”

“Yes, Papa.”

She kept her head down as she made her way to the stairs and slowly climbed them. She shooed away the maid who scrambled to help her and shut the door on the rest of the household. She stoked her fire and curled up on the window seat, staring out toward the east—toward Tredwell Abbey.

Chapter Twelve

The Loughtons left two days later to return to London. Henrietta had spent most of the time either practicing piano as instructed or sitting quietly out of doors in her cloak. The weather had turned unseasonably warm for the time of year but, even so, her time outdoors was very limited due to the winter air.

Lady Loughton fussed much of the way back to London, as though to keep Henrietta from thinking or talking of anything remotely connected to the Strathom family. Eliza had come for a short call just before they had left and had brought a cautiously good report of George's recovery.

Henrietta stared out the window for much of the way, and kept her eyes closed as she listened to her mother. Lord Loughton said little, alternating between reading and napping. It seemed a very long journey to Henrietta.

She felt little relief to be back at Radford House. It did not feel like home, more of a stage upon which she must act a part. She retreated gratefully to her room and allowed Hatcher to help her change out of her travelling clothes into an afternoon dress. After her maid had left, she pulled out George's portrait and gazed at it for a moment before replacing it and returning downstairs.

She found her mother seated at the desk, going through her post. There was a large stack of invitations to one side and she could see her mother was delighted with the prospects. Her calendar was out, and she was making several annotations on it.

Henrietta went to the piano and proceeded with a few warm-ups. Then she tried playing a song from memory and kept getting stuck in the same place. Not long after, her mother finished up her post and began to write her responses. Henrietta decided to play one or two familiar tunes very softly so as not to interrupt her mother or draw too much attention to her playing.

Supper was eventually called, and Henrietta left the instrument gratefully. She was ready to eat and be excused to bed where she could be alone with her thoughts. Alas, such was not the case. Her mother began discussing the schedule of upcoming events.

"Lady Cassandra Martinet has a ball coming up. We may need to get you a new gown for that. Perhaps that dressmaker you met on King's Road? We'll

go there tomorrow and see. Several supper parties and a few afternoon teas, not to mention one or two balls I think we must attend. The Season is certainly heating up!”

Henrietta tried to smile but failed, though the thought of seeing Miss Saunders and having another gown made was certainly a pleasant one. “And Lord Charles left his card—which means he called while we were in Lytchley. Bad luck, but hopefully he will call again. I will write him our regrets that we weren’t here.”

Lady Loughton ate with gusto, and supper continued with her doing most of the talking with Henrietta obediently saying ‘yes, Mother’ and the occasional ‘splendid’ from Lord Loughton. Henrietta’s hope that supper would be quick was dashed as her mother could not eat and talk at the same time, and she apparently had much to say.

It wasn’t until two days later, though, that she was able to get away with her mother to visit the dressmaker. Lady Loughton was clearly unimpressed with the size of the shop but had to admit that the quality of workmanship and the design of the samples present were singular.

Miss Saunders came forward and they discussed the dress needed. Bolts of cloth were brought out and admired, and Henrietta finally chose a soft, pale green silk and organza for the sheer overdress. Her mother clucked about Great Aunt Delilah’s emeralds and Henrietta found herself discussed in the third person for some time.

After a while, her mother said, “I just must run to Whitlows for a chatelaine. I will be right back, Henrietta.”

Henrietta bid her goodbye, then turned back to Miss Saunders and her assessing gaze. Henrietta’s eyebrows rose and she asked, “Is there something you wish to ask me?”

“Oh, forgive me. I mentioned you to some friends some time ago, only to find out they were well known to you.”

“Who?”

“The Strathoms? My uncle is courting Lady Strathom.” She began rolling the bolt up again and added, “Well, he says not, but his actions say that he is. She seems a pleasant enough person.”

Henrietta was surprised but strove to hide it. “Yes, I know the Strathoms very well. One of my particular friends has just married Mr. George’s brother, Sir William.”

“The baronet! Yes, I had heard something about that. How small the world seems at times.”

“Indeed.” Henrietta glanced away for a moment and then said, “Was anything said about me?”

One corner of Jemima’s mouth crept upward. “Only that you are a ‘beautiful creature’ and that you liking my shop was a real compliment.”

Henrietta smiled and fingered the lapel of a spencer nearby and said, “La! This is beautiful. The detail on this edging!”

"It would go well with the dress you have on."

"In warmer weather, perhaps."

"Well, yes."

She sighed. "I must wait, I suppose. I have more than enough clothes to get me through spring!"

Miss Saunders looked at her and grinned. "I did not know it was possible for a young lady to have too many clothes!"

Henrietta's head tilted to one side as she considered. "Well, perhaps I could use one more spencer..."

Miss Saunders laughed and began unbuttoning the spencer from the model. Henrietta tried it on, and some pins were placed to adjust it.

"I will have this sent to you in a day or so."

Just then, Lady Loughton returned, approved the spencer with barely a glance and they left. "I don't know why, but shopping always makes me thirsty."

"I know of a tea shop nearby," she said, careful not to mention with whom she had visited the tea shop.

Her mother touched her throat to emphasize her thirst and said, "Oh, well then, lead on."

Henrietta led them to the tea shop on the corner and sat them at the very same table she had shared with George and Mrs. Daggett all those weeks earlier. Her mother sipped her tea with real satisfaction, then fussed about the quality of the scones and cakes. Henrietta was relieved when she finally finished, and they could return to the carriage.

When they reached home, they were surprised to see a barouche landau in front of Radford House. Henrietta looked it over curiously as she climbed the steps behind her mother and was divested of her pelisse, hat, and gloves. She entered the parlor to find her father and Lord Charles Tymonds standing, apparently waiting.

Lord Charles bowed succinctly, then sat. "I was in the neighborhood, Miss Darrow, and thought I would stop by and see if you have begun your riding yet."

"Indeed, yes. I have ridden several times with Miss Abernethy."

"Excellent. I was hoping to persuade you to join me Thursday next for a turn about the Park."

Lady Loughton fairly bounced on her seat. "Oh, she would be happy to—I can vouch for the fact that she has no prior engagements."

He stood. "Excellent. Until Thursday next."

Henrietta stood and curtsied, then watched as Lord Charles left. He got into his barouche and it pulled away onto the street. Henrietta smoothed her hair belatedly, eyebrows raised.

Her mother was already clucking contentedly. "Oh, I knew it would be so! He is an excellent young man, so courteous and with such fine manners. You must wear your new riding habit, Henrietta!"

“Mama, I always wear the new habit.” She turned from the window.

“Yes, but...oh, well. You must look your best.”

“I will endeavor to do so—we must hope it doesn’t rain.”

“Oh, indeed. But, it is only raining in the country this time of the year.”

She turned to her husband and asked, “And what did you think of him? Is he not an excellent young man?”

“I certainly see nothing against him. He can speak well enough.”

This was not commendation enough for Lady Loughton, who frowned slightly. “He is also an excellent dancer and much in demand this Season.”

She bustled to the desk where her calendar lay and wrote in the new engagement, humming to herself as she did so.

Henrietta said nothing to all this. She went upstairs to change for supper and have a few moments to herself. She let Hatcher help her undress, then begged to be left alone for a while. She wrapped her dressing gown around her chemise and curled into the chair by the fire.

When she was sure of being alone, she hazarded a peek at George’s portrait, then slipped it back into its hiding place. She lay down on the bed and closed her eyes, but sleep did not come and after half an hour, she rang the bell for her maid to help her dress.

The carriage was ready just after seven to take them to their evening engagement—a supper party at the Harringmans’ home. Both of her parents were going, and she considered how well they looked. Her father, with his large white mustache and regal bearing, despite the tummy that wanted to protrude. And her mother, rather like a ship in sail, her bust cutting the waters of the crowd before her.

Henrietta bit her lip to keep from grinning unbecomingly at the thought and stepped into their carriage, twitching her cloak out of her father’s way as he adjusted himself.

The Harringmans were an older, but fashionable couple who enjoyed bringing young people together. Their home was in Kensington, and they were extremely well connected. Henrietta was happy to see Augusta was also there and she smiled in her direction.

She was once again called on to perform, and this time managed to do so without hitting a wrong note. Her playing was well received, and she noted that Lord Charles particularly clapped at the end of it.

Once done, she went to sit next to Augusta. They chatted in undertones as the other girls sat at the instrument, then listened to Lady Cassandra play the harp. Her performance was well received, but Henrietta thought it mechanical and lacking in feeling.

Augusta’s eyes widened. “Oh! If only I had such talent!”

Henrietta leaned close and said, “And yet, if it wasn’t such a rare talent I do not think anyone would call her performance singular.”

“Miss Darrow, how can you say so?” Augusta covered the smile that started.

“Quite easily! You play with more feeling than she does!”

Lord Charles rose and headed their way, causing both to pause in their whispering. He nodded to both and stood beside Henrietta.

She raised her face and said, “Good day, Lord Charles. And how do you do?”

“Very well, thank you Miss Darrow. I wanted to tell you how much I enjoyed your performance at the piano.”

“Thank you. I am only glad I did not sing this time.”

“I should have liked to hear you sing.”

Henrietta did not know how to respond to this, and so she simply waited expectantly for him to continue.

“I am looking forward to our ride.”

“As am I. Miss Abernethy here rides as well. Perhaps she should join us?”

“As to that...I am under...excuse me, I must pay other respects.” He quickly moved away and came to rest beside Lady Cassandra who received him warmly.

Henrietta watched the two of them for a moment, then leaned once more to Augusta. “What say you to that match?”

Augusta turned to watch the two of them, both conversing in the same rather stilted manner. “But he did ask to ride with you...”

“I imagine he is asking to ride with many young ladies. This is his chance to look us all over.”

Augusta snorted into her handkerchief. “Miss Darrow, really!”

“Well—is it not so? And our chance to look them over.”

Augusta stifled another giggle and sighed. “Yes, I suppose it is true. I wish it were all over.”

“Yes. I could enjoy the balls and dancing and such if there wasn’t the pressure to have an engagement or at least an understanding at the end of it all.”

“I noticed that Mr. George Strathom is not here.” Augusta glanced around as though she hoped he had suddenly materialized.

“No, he is still in Lytchley—he had a bad fall from his horse.”

“Dear me! I cannot imagine him ever coming off a horse.”

“This happened at night, over a fence,” Henrietta said drily.

“And is he badly hurt?”

“We were very concerned at first, but he is recovering quickly now, I believe. My last letter from Eliza, er, Lady Strathom, was hopeful.”

“I am glad to hear it. He is such a kind gentleman.”

There was something in Augusta’s voice that caused Henrietta to look rather sharply at her. Further conversation was impossible as they were both joined by another young lady and forced to make rather small talk.

Soon, the evening came to an end and carriages were called. Henrietta bid Augusta good evening and thanked her hosts, then followed her parents

gratefully to their own carriage.

Once home and in her nightdress, she pulled out her portrait of George and reread Eliza's letter detailing his recovery. Then, she curled beneath her warmed covers and fell asleep.

Chapter Thirteen

George had spent a difficult few days at Tredwell Abbey. The dizziness took days to begin to fade, and his broken ribs made sitting up painful. He was sick of lying still and fighting the spinning by the time his head began to clear.

Finally, on the fifth day he was able to sit up and take some broth, with William watching over him.

“I would kill for a scone!” George said to the room in general.

William said only, “You couldn’t challenge a kitten in your present state.”

“Bring the kitten, and we shall see.” George leaned back against the pillow with his eyes closed.

Eliza came in with a tray containing a plate of scones and shortbread.

George caught sight of it and grinned. “My dearest sister has heard my lamentations.”

“I feared the further mess the kitten might make of your face.” She smiled and set down the tray. She took a scone and buttered it for him, then passed it to him on a small plate.

William frowned. “Doctor Welles said broth...”

“Dr. Welles has not lived on nothing but broth and water for days! His stomach deserves testing. I made these myself!”

“How did Cook take that?” William asked.

“Asked me how I got them so light!”

William chuckled. “You have charmed the whole household.”

She looked deeply into his eyes, and George cleared his throat. “You are married now, no need for staring all lovesick at each other.” Then he took another bite of scone and washed it down with the tea she had poured him. “Manna from heaven...”

“If you keep improving, perhaps you could sit downstairs tomorrow.”

“This evening?”

“Mmmm. Tomorrow.” She gave him a stern look.

He sighed and took another bite. It was not long before he was leaning back, satisfied and needing to rest. Eliza handed the tray to a maid and stepped out, leaving her husband with his brother.

William sat beside him, and George opened his eyes. "I apologize for ever objecting to that fine woman. I had no idea she could make scones!"

William chuckled. "Well, it wasn't just you. I had gotten myself into quite the situation prior to meeting her."

George laughed. "True. Lucky for you, though, it all worked out."

"How are you really feeling?"

"Head is beastly, but at least the room doesn't spin as it did."

"That is progress."

"Yes."

William stood. "Well, rest now. We can talk more when you are recovered. Oh! I forgot to tell you, Delia sent a letter to each of us."

"Can you summarize yours in your own, masterful way?"

His expression hardened as he said, "She is very concerned, and hoping that I am taking adequate care of you. And that the 'governess' is behaving appropriately."

George's eyes flew open. "She did not call her that—did she?"

A little glint of anger flashed in William's eyes. "She must have been in a rush, for she directed the letters wrong. The one directed to me was written for you."

George's hand came up and slid down his face. "Oh, William. I am sorry. Mother can be such a..."

"Yes. I can't change how she feels, but I can ensure she treats the new Lady Strathom with the courtesy and precedence she deserves."

"I will support you in that completely."

"Thank you. But she is very concerned, even considered coming down to Tredwell."

"Lord—that is inducement enough to get better. Mother in Lytchley? Never!"

William laughed. "I must admit to feeling some trepidation at the thought."

"I will write her tomorrow and calm her fears. I may drop a hint at what she did just to torment her a bit."

"Well, rest for now. I will stop by later."

George merely nodded and closed his eyes. In truth, he was exhausted by the mere act of sitting up and eating and was ready to slide down and doze. The pounding of his head made it difficult, however, to sleep and yet it hurt so to open his eyes. This merely left him time to lie still and think.

And he most especially did not want to think.

He regretted being so cruel to Henrietta when she had come to see him, and yet what was a man to do? They could not go on as friends, that was a lie. Or rather, not the whole truth. They loved each other, of that he was certain. And yet she did not love him as he loved her if she could continue playing the part she must play. A bride waiting for a husband to speak for her—a prize to be captured by the most eligible man.

A part of him longed to tell her of his coming independence, and yet in his heart he wanted to know she would take him as he was, living in a borrowed house with only a gig to his name. Of course, put like that...it did seem rather stark.

But if she loved him?

Her parents.

He sighed. He remembered William's sense of duty and how it had nearly cost him everything. George had not been saddled with that particular burden. He had been encouraged in just about anything—nothing he did had really mattered. His father had instilled good principles and his mother had insisted on impeccable manners, but he had grown up with a freedom William had never had. Perhaps, he thought, it was the same for Henrietta.

Sometime in the midst of those thoughts, he fell into a welcomed sleep.

When he woke the next morning, it was to true clarity of mind. Gone was the vertigo and the relentless pounding. In its place was a raging hunger and the slightest ache where the pounding had been. He sat up and waited for the dizziness, but it did not come. He rang the bell, and Leavitt stepped in.

His eyes widened to see George sitting up and he asked, "Are you wanting to get dressed, sir?"

"A bath, first, if you don't mind," George said gaily.

"Certainly!"

An hour later, bathed and dressed, George went downstairs to the dining room and filled his own plate. William watched him but let him make his own way to the table. Eliza sat ready to jump up if needed, but George smiled reassuringly at her and sat down at the table with a plate heaped with eggs and tomatoes, kidney beans and toast.

He ate until he thought he would burst—the food tasted all the better for being the first time in nearly a week he had an actual meal.

He leaned back, finally satisfied. "If I never drink broth again, it will be too soon!"

"What are your plans today?" William asked.

"Write to Mother, then sit in front of the fireplace and ring the bell for tea and cakes all day."

Eliza looked up from her plate. "I'll let Cook know to prepare a constant stream of cakes for you."

"What, you won't make them with your own two hands?" He grinned lopsidedly at her.

"I wonder if you did not hit your head just a little harder than we thought..."

"Nay, sister, I am well. Just giddy with relief to have my stomach full and my head empty."

William and Eliza burst out laughing at that.

"No...I mean...Oh, dash it." He joined them in laughing.

Finally, it died, and he rose to go to the library to write his letter in order

to get it into the morning post. He found it difficult to pen the words without referring to his mother's gaffe in the directions, and finally just mentioned that it had been so. She needed to be aware of her actions, he thought.

Once directed and put into the hands of the butler to be mailed, he made his way back to the great room and settled by the fire. He stared into it, thinking that Henrietta had probably returned to London by then, and was back into her whirlwind of social activities. He itched to be there, if only to know what was going on in her life by the occasional meetings at mutual events.

He leaned back and gritted his teeth, knowing that even now she could be riding into Hyde Park and meeting some young man who would be viewed as an appropriate match.

Would she agree to an engagement on such terms? He hoped not...

But, after all, perhaps it was time to go home.

Chapter Fourteen

Thursday next arrived in good time and found Henrietta astride her horse, dressed in her best riding habit. A pair of sapphire earrings added a touch of sparkle to go with the dark blue velvet. Her mother was mounted beside her, dressed in a dark brown habit that contrasted quite well against the grayish white of her horse. She held her mount steady a few paces behind Henrietta, ready to ride to the back as the two made their circuit.

Lord Charles rode up on a magnificent black horse. His jacket and breeches were immaculate, and his boots shone in the dull sunlight struggling through the gray clouds.

He nodded and said, "You look quite well on horseback."

"Thank you, Lord Charles, it is one of my favorite places to be."

He urged his horse forward and they stepped off. For all his talk about riding, he seemed very hesitant in his style. His horse seemed nervous, and Henrietta felt if he would just loosen his grip on the reins and relax his legs, the horse would probably settle down.

Her horse tossed its head in response to the other, and she spoke calmly but firmly. "Easy, Pudding."

"Pudding?" He said with a hesitant smile.

Henrietta laughed softly. "I named her when I was but a girl."

He tensed his shoulders and gave the reins a jerk which caused his horse to snap his head up. "Poseidon just has too much power in him. You can see how difficult a time I am having with him."

"Perhaps if you loosened your grip..."

"And have him tear off across the park?" He stared incredulously at her.

"I just thought he might calm somewhat," she replied.

"No, that would have the opposite effect, I assure you," he said as a glimmer of annoyance flashed in his eyes.

The more his horse balked and hesitated, the more he pulled back on the reins. Henrietta found herself relaxing more and loosening her grip to try and help keep her own horse be as calm as possible. It was a tense ride around the park.

Lady Loughton kept far back from the edgy stallion, her own sedate mare oblivious to the other horse's antics and content to merely plod along. She

added to the atmosphere, however, by tutting and clucking in frightened anticipation every time Lord Charles' horse broke gait or tossed its head.

Conversation was near impossible, and Lord Charles made no effort to speak, except when calling attention to his horse with expelled breaths of exertion and comments upon Henrietta's horse.

"She seems a pretty tame mare—a little too tame for my taste."

"She can take any fence you set her to and wins most races."

"She would not win against Poseidon, whatever you may say. You would not believe what my father paid for him."

"He is a beautiful animal," Henrietta said dutifully.

Apparently, her compliment was not enough, for a little while later he said, "It is excessively tiring to be constantly at war with one's own mount. It has required much work to be able to ride him for hunts."

"I can only imagine," she said as the horse broke gait and tried to canter off with its head nearly bowed to its chest.

At one point, Lord Charles pulled his head around and rode him in circles for a minute or two before straightening the horse out. Then, a little later, the horse seemed to explode forward and took off at a gallop with its tail up. Lord Charles slipped to one side, then managed to straighten himself and pull the horse up. He cantered sideways back toward Henrietta, whose own horse seemed mildly intrigued by the antics.

Henrietta was exhausted from the effort of maintaining her calm before they had completed their ride. As soon as Lord Charles dismounted, the stallion calmed and stood quietly under the control of the groom.

"Yes, worn out, I dare say! The other horses were so nervous, they riled him up." He slapped his horse on the shoulder.

"You must be thinking of another horse. Pudding was quite calm the entire time."

"You haven't the eyes of a horseman, Miss Darrow, or you would have seen how wild-eyed your mare was every time she caught sight of Poseidon."

"Well, she walked calmly enough and jogged when asked, but never broke gait," Henrietta said matter-of-factly.

"Probably because I kept Poseidon so well under control."

Henrietta smiled and waited as he thanked her and obviously wanted her to make some comment upon his horsemanship. Unable to lie, even for the sake of politeness, she merely commented on what a beautiful creature his horse was. His speech became, if possible, even more stilted and formal as he bid her a good day.

She climbed thankfully into the carriage where her mother was busy arranging a rug over her lap to dispel the chill of the morning. "Oh, my dear, did you ever see the like! Such masterful horsemanship, you could see what a wild thing his horse was."

"I could see what a nervous thing he was, all bunched up and tight from being mismanaged."

“Oh, Henrietta! How can you say so? You saw how it nearly broke free of him on several occasions.”

“Mama, he had it in a vise grip, as I suspect he holds many things in life. The poor creature could barely move without being checked.”

“You make no allowance for the drive and manner of a stallion. Only a gifted and strong horseman can control such an animal.”

Henrietta gave up but remained convinced in her own mind that if she had had control of that horse, it would have been a very different ride.

They had little time to debate it, however. The ride home was short, and there was a ball to prepare for that evening. Lady Cassandra had, indeed, found Henrietta to be worthy of an invitation to her ball and it was that very night. Henrietta planned to wear a soft pink dress with sheer silk organza overdress and a white sash.

First, though, a bath was needed to wash every inkling of horsiness from her. Even her hair needed to be washed and dried carefully before the fire. Luckily, she was able to nap while it dried since she would be required to stay until the very late hours of the morning for a ball of this importance.

Her hair was finally arranged and curled carefully, with tiny ribbons woven amongst the curls falling from the crown of her head. She wore her grandmother's opals, and their hidden fire came to life in the candlelight as she completed her toilette. Finally, she added her best slippers and her cloak, and she was ready.

Her mother nodded approvingly as she stepped smoothly down the stairs. “Perfect! You look exceptionally well, my dear!”

Henrietta thanked her and climbed once more into the carriage.

The Earl of Medlows' expansive home appeared very different at night and alight with torchlight. There was a line of carriages waiting to disgorge their occupants onto the walkway that led to the house. Torches were everywhere, glinting off the jewelry, silks, and satins as the people paraded toward the house.

Henrietta found her stomach knotted with nerves and had to take several deep breaths. She waited while her mother was handed out, then stepped free herself into the torchlight. Following just a step behind her mother, she walked up the wide path to the house which seemed to blaze with light from within. She could hear the murmur of voices rising in the night as she neared. Her heart hammered, but she maintained her calm exterior as she curtsied to the Earl of Medlows, his wife, Lady Medlows, and Lady Cassandra herself.

Then they were swept up in the crowd, which seemed to swell as they neared the ballroom. Her mother glanced with longing at the supper tables laden with exquisite offerings and took in the size of the room with awe. She stepped toward an acquaintance, leaving Henrietta behind her.

“Miss Darrow,” someone spoke softly beside her.

She stared. It was George, and he was smiling rather hesitantly at her. Her face lit up instantly—all thought of disagreement between them forgotten

with the sight of him well and standing before her.

Her eyebrows puckered at the sight of the healing cut on his forehead. He had combed his hair slightly differently to detract from it, but she knew it was there and took note.

“Mr. Strathom. You are recovered?”

“Yes, and just returned to London.”

She felt her forehead crease in sudden concern. “Surely a longer rest would be advisable?”

“I may not dance as much tonight as I normally do, but I am perfectly well.”

“I am so glad to hear it!”

The orchestra was beginning to tune, and the floor began to clear. She looked up as the introduction started and saw Lord Charles lead Lady Cassandra to the floor. A touch at her elbow, and George held out his arm. She took it before her mother could object, and he led her out onto the floor.

Her heart was singing as he gazed down at her. He caught her hand at just the right time as she went by, and she tilted her head toward him and smiled deeply into his eyes. The floor had filled quickly, and they had to watch their steps to stay out of the way of other couples. His arms went about her in time to the music, and her hand caught his. They danced in perfect unison, each in tune to the other.

It was over far too soon. He led her back toward her mother, but she was claimed by another man before they reached her. George gave way with rather bad grace, but she glanced backward over her shoulder at him as she was led away.

From then on, her hand was vied for by D’Courcy and other young men, all of varying degrees of ability. She saw George dance with Augusta Abernethy and a few other girls and could not fight the little rise of jealousy she felt. Especially when George led Augusta to the floor for the second time.

She managed to capture him just as the dance ended and he deposited Augusta back with her mother. She smiled at her friend and then led George away to get some punch.

“So, despite your injuries, you are dancing quite a lot with Miss Abernethy.”

“I suppose it must seem so, but that is my job, I believe.”

She frowned. “What do you mean?”

“I think I was invited to make sure all young ladies had partners.”

Henrietta had not thought about this. “Well, but what are your intentions toward my friend?”

“Mine alone, and not for discussion.”

“Come,” she said, feeling unreasonably angry at his reticence. “Surely you can tell an old friend...”

“I would have to tell Miss Abernethy first. Besides, you did not want my attentions, or intentions, if I remember rightly,” he said with more than a hint

of stiffness in his manner.

“No, that is not what I said...” She paled before the glittering light in his eyes, but just then she was hailed by Lord Charles and she very gratefully allowed herself to be led off.

Lord Charles danced much the way he rode horses. Careful and controlled, requiring complete compliance. Henrietta found it constraining and stressful to be constantly watching for his cues and bending herself to them. She noted Lady Cassandra’s steady, unfriendly expression turned in her direction, and wished to be free of both of their attentions!

It was finally over, and she made her way to the supper table to rest. There was a place next to Augusta open, and she sat down with a sigh.

Augusta smiled at her and said, “Are you having a good ball?”

“Well, I am having a very active one.”

“I saw you danced with Mr. Strathom. He is a very good dancer.”

“Well, you have danced several times with him.”

She looked down. “Yes.” She seemed to hesitate then asked, “What do you know of him?”

Henrietta paused in the process of putting a piece of cake into her mouth. “Well, he is of a good family, and of an excellent character. He now has a wonderful sister-in-law.”

“I always wished for a sister. Is she very nice?”

Something cold clutched at Henrietta’s heart but she forced herself to reply. “She is the kindest thing you could hope for.” She dropped her voice and added, “Do you have an understanding with George?”

“Oh no—only, he has been rather particular this evening. I just wondered about him.”

“I see.”

And Henrietta did see. She had been forced to refuse him, but that didn’t mean others would. *After all*, she told herself, *he must marry someone*. But the very notion made her ill with jealousy and it was all she could do to remain civil to her friend.

Augusta must have noticed, for she said, “Perhaps you think me too forward, but I had hoped since you were such good friends that you could tell me something of him.”

“Not at all, Miss Abernethy, I am most happy to tell you what I can. It is just that I find I know so little of the Strathoms.”

“Oh—it is like that, I know. How often I think I know someone, then realize how little I actually do know them.”

Henrietta forced a smile. “Yes, exactly.”

Just then, Cecil D’Courcy bobbed up, begging for Henrietta’s hand for the next dance.

She glanced up in time to see George coming her way and said, “Thank you, Mr. D’Courcy, I would be happy to have this dance with you.”

George seemed taken aback by the look she gave him and instantly

turned to Augusta, who accepted him with alacrity. The two couples made their way to the floor. It was surprising to Henrietta how often her eyes met George's, considering how much she was trying to avoid staring at him.

They danced, though neither couple was terribly successful. This may have been because Henrietta and George were focused more on each other than on their partners, and each was too angry with the other to pay attention to where their feet landed. All four were relieved when the dance was over.

Henrietta was then surprised to find George holding a hand out to her in mute demand for a dance. "Certainly," she responded and allowed herself to be led off once more.

They danced in silence, until Henrietta's anger turned to tears that threatened to spill. He saw it and led her gently from the floor. Through the open windows, they went onto the terrace where a few other couples were taking the air. She all but ran to the balustrade and he let her catch her breath.

After a moment, he asked, "Are you better, now?"

Her voice was a little shaky, but she answered, "Yes, thank you."

"May I ask why you are so angry?"

"I might ask the same."

"Perhaps for the same reason. I do not like to see you dancing with D'Courcy."

"It was only twice. How many times have you danced with Miss Abernethy?"

He sighed. "I don't like to see any young lady neglected."

"Well, you have given her a very different idea."

He seemed taken aback. "Then I am sorry for it. Despite what I said earlier, you know very well there is only one woman for me."

Her heart lifted, and she looked up at him. For a moment, they were alone as the other couples had all gone inside for a toast. His breath caught and he bent quickly to kiss her open mouth under the starlight. He felt her answer, her hand went to his neck, and his own body began to respond to her.

With a gasp they broke apart, neither bothering to cast around to see if anyone had witnessed their kiss. Their hearts were hammering, even as they put some distance between them and George steadied himself with both hands against the railing.

"Henrietta..." he pleaded.

"I can't," she all but choked.

He closed his eyes and felt rather than heard her move away and return to the ballroom. His healing ribs were aching, as was his head. He knew he had been too active too soon and by rights should go home to rest, but he refused to give in. Instead, he savored the memory of their kiss and stood, waiting for his heart to quit beating so fast. He dragged in a deep breath and then let it out.

Turning around, he could see couples swirling past through the windows. Henrietta went by, in the arms of another man. His throat constricted and he

decided it was, indeed, time to go.

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Henrietta had been accosted for the dance as soon as she had returned to the ballroom. Desperate to avoid her mother, she had accepted and found herself whirled into another set.

Her new slippers had been pinching her feet all night. Now, they ached from an evening's worth of dancing and the last thing she wanted was yet more twirling.

She caught sight of Augusta sitting neglected and felt a pang of regret. Of course George would take pity on a young woman such as she, it was in his nature to be kind. Why, she wondered, did they always clash so, when their hearts and souls were so attuned? She thought she knew—the block she had thrown in the midst of their friendship could not help but cause antagonism between them.

Oh, if only we could just go on as perfect friends and never marry anyone else!

The dance ended and she made her way back to the terrace, standing in the same place that George had kissed her. She saw his broad-shouldered figure below, walking alone toward a gig with a single chestnut held waiting for him. She watched as he thanked the man, climbed up and took the reins.

Only then did he look up toward where she stood. He went still, as did she, and their eyes met across the distance. It was all she could do not to run after him and climb onto the seat beside him.

Then, he looked away and tapped the reins. The chestnut pulled out with a little jump, and they trotted around the drive. Henrietta stayed where she was, watching the spot where he had disappeared from view for a long time.

Chapter Fifteen

Weeks passed, and George refused most social invitations. He could no longer bear to see Henrietta after being refused yet again.

The only parties he could not avoid were the ones thrown by his mother at Lincoln House.

Another such supper party was underway, and he was doing his best to seem interested in Vansittart's explanation of Arkwright's frame for spinning cotton. He was describing the minute details and comparing it to over one hundred spinners in its speed and efficiency.

"It sounds like a marvelous invention, sir," was all George could say.

Vansittart looked at him, assessing. "You should come to Hertfordshire and see," he said. "Get you up and involved in something besides dancing and riding horses."

"I told Remy how in demand you are this Season," his mother interposed.

"Thank you, that would be most interesting," George said.

"Horse busted you up rather badly, I understand." Vansittart pointed with his glass to George's healed forehead.

"Yes, sir. I was lucky to escape as well off as I did."

"Bad head, from what I hear."

"At first, yes. Now, just a slight headache here and there."

"Your mother was terribly worried." He placed a hand on Delia's back.

"Dear Remy called on me shortly after I got William's letter. I was distraught." She placed a hand on his chest.

"Too distraught to travel—I counseled against it."

"Thank you for your interest, sir. I am glad she didn't risk the trip."

"What do you think, George, of taking a trip to Hertfordshire to visit Remy's mills?"

"Oh, I think it would be a very educational endeavor."

He tried to sound enthusiastic, but privately wondered who this woman was and what she had done with his mother. He doubted there was a cotton dress anywhere in her wardrobe.

"I thought most of the mills were in Lancashire," he added.

"They are, but we bought two older mills in Hertfordshire and refitted

them with all the newest equipment. And since we are so close to London, we save on shipping.”

“Well, I look forward to furthering my understanding.” George said.

“Good, good,” Vansittart said. “I will get busy planning it. Maybe we can convince Jemima to join us!”

“What was that? I heard my name.” Jemima came over, carrying a glass that she sipped with upraised eyebrows.

“Your uncle suggested we all take a tour of Hertfordshire and the cotton mills he owns there,” George said.

Jemima turned to her uncle with an incredulous expression. “Uncle, I can’t leave my shop in the middle of the Season—I have so many orders that I should not even be here tonight.”

“Surely you can leave it for a few days? I will cover your expenses.”

“It isn’t that, it is my word. I even have a dress for Mr. George’s friend Miss Darrow that needs to be completed by next Friday.”

“What is happening next Friday?” he asked, then wished he hadn’t.

“It is her own ball, that evening,” she said, obviously surprised that he didn’t know. “She had something else to wear, but we came up with another dress she decided she would prefer.”

“Surely you shouldn’t divulge...” Delia began.

“We are all friends together here, are we not? I am not describing the dress in any way. Are you planning to attend, Mr. Strathom?”

“As I have received no invitation, I suspect not. Therefore, I am available for any trip you might suggest, Mr. Vansittart.”

“Good, good!” The man clapped George on the shoulder, before his mother led him away.

That he was her beau, George no longer had any doubt. He wondered what that would mean for Lincoln House if she married. Perhaps William would sell it, or perhaps actually settle it on himself. His head began to ache, and suddenly he realized that Miss Saunders was still standing nearby and watching him closely.

“I’m sorry about that,” she said.

“About what?”

“Being thrown together. Uncle wants us to marry and for me to give up my shop.”

“Yes, I had gathered something of the kind,” he said, more than a little shocked at her forwardness.

She seemed to read his feelings and added, “Oh, I know. Terribly forward and open, but that is my way.”

He smiled. “At least one knows where one stands with you.”

She lifted her glass and said after a minute, “Thank you. And, in gratitude for you acknowledging so much, I will tell you that I have no inclination or intention of marrying and that you are safe with me.”

The shock must have shown on his face for she laughed shortly and took

another sip from her glass.

His surprised expression relapsed into a rueful grin, however. "I thank you. But beware, once my mother gets her mind set on something it can be difficult to dissuade her. She may just plan the wedding anyway."

She laughed outright at that. Weariness must have shown on his face, however, for she said in what must pass for a gentle tone for her, "Mr. George, you look done in. Perhaps you should retire. Shall I give your excuses to your mother?"

He rubbed a hand across his eyes and nodded. "Yes, thank you. I think I will."

He set his glass down, before turning to walk away. His head was truly pounding before he reached his room, and it was all he could do to undress and climb into bed.

The fact that he had not been invited to Henrietta's ball had hit him hard, and any hopes he might have had were suddenly toppling. He closed his eyes against the pounding and the reality of her rejection. And yet, he thought, this had been his plan when he began refusing all social engagements. That, and to disentangle himself from any thoughts the Abernethys might have had of him toward their daughter.

He groaned and rolled over, trying to shut everything out, but the feel of Henrietta's lips against his kept returning to torment him.

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A few streets over, Henrietta was spending a rare evening home with no engagements. Her mother had been busy most of the day planning menus and drawing up floorplans with the housekeeper and butler. She had been down to the ostler to discuss carriages and had spoken to the cook about supper tables.

Henrietta had been more or less ignored and had slept in, practiced piano, and reread her letters from Penelope and Eliza. Now, she was in bed and sketching some detail into her portrait of George. It had been weeks since she had seen him, and if he had hoped that absence would make her forget him, he had been wrong.

She set the drawing down against her knees and leaned her head back against the pillows. Once more, George's lips were on hers, her body melting against his as he drew her closer in his arms. Her breath came faster as her body warmed to life at the memory.

She caught herself and sat up, then sighed. His image was still engraved on her heart, and she knew now that no other would ever take its place.

But what to do? Her parents would never allow it, and to marry him would be to estrange herself from them forever. And there was Reggie to think of... Was she to never see her younger brother? Though she thought that perhaps in time they could be reconciled to the marriage, it would always be a cloud over them.

She set the portrait aside and closed her eyes. If only there was no ball

within a few days. The stress of perfection, a burden at any time, would be incalculable for this. Her mother was already pressing her to stay indoors, out of the sun and wind, watch her deportment, practice the piano and sing. Everything from how she sat to how she lifted a spoon was being observed and critiqued.

She was tired...so, so tired of it all. If only it was over and she was home in Lytchley.

Her mother's steps sounded outside her room, soon followed by a knock and the door opening. Henrietta quickly stashed George's portrait under her pillow and sat up.

"There you are! You should be practicing the piano. Spare your voice, though. It needs to rest before the ball."

"Yes, Mother."

Lady Loughton's eyebrows came together and she peered closely at Henrietta's face. "You're looking wan—are you not sleeping well?"

"Not very...perhaps."

"I will give you a draught tonight to help. We can't have you looking like that."

"Perhaps some fresh air...?"

"And risk your complexion? Absolutely not."

"I am doing my best, Mother."

Her mother paused, then said, "My dear, you must do better. Those circles under your eyes—no amount of powder will hide them."

"Yes, Mother."

"Rest now. I'll have your supper brought up to you."

Then she was gone, and Henrietta sighed. She knew she looked ill, but what ailed her could not be fixed by mere rest or a doctor's call. She was sick at heart, and likely to remain so.

She lifted the pillow and gazed down at the face lying partly concealed. Moments passed as she traced the mouth sketched there and remembered their kisses. Her breath caught and she suppressed a tear. Slowly, she covered the portrait with her pillow.

She lay down, but her head had barely touched the pillow when there was another knock at the door, and her mother came in yet again.

She gave a small smile and said, "Ah, not yet asleep. I was just thinking of the family parures and wondering if we were agreed on all your points of dress."

Henrietta rearranged the pillow with one hand while the other pushed a lock of hair out of her face. "No, not that I remember. I thought we had plenty of time."

"The ball is in just a few days, and you have a very busy time of it until then. That being said, we should consult now while we have a moment to think on it."

"Of course, Mama."

She sat forward and peered at the cases her mother had brought out. There were four, and she had seen them all before. Her mother was nearly giddy with delight as she opened them.

“Now, you will be all in white, so pearls seems possible, but these earrings really don’t do justice to the length of your neck. The opals are nice, but you have already worn them, and they tend to go flat with the white.”

“How about the sapphires? I could wear a sapphire blue sash with the gown and maybe blue rosettes on my slippers.”

Her mother seemed struck with the idea. “Oh! That would be splendid. The emeralds are rather small, and you have always looked particularly well in blues.” She began packing up the parures and added, “We can stop by the Saunders shop tomorrow to see if she can prepare a special sash and some matching rosettes for your shoes.”

“That will be very nice.”

Her mother seemed to notice her lack of enthusiasm and considered her closely. “What is wrong, Henrietta? Are you not getting adequate rest?”

“I am tired, it is true.” She brushed at a lock of hair and then leaned her hand back beside the pillow.

Her mother’s face grew softer and she reached out to pat the hand next to the pillow. “I know, dear. I know I am hard on you. My mother did the same to me. But, like her, I have only your best in mind.” She smiled, then a frown creased her forehead as her fingers came in contact with paper and she drew the board with George’s portrait from underneath Henrietta’s pillow.

“Oh, Mama, please...” She broke off at the expression on Lady Loughton’s face.

Her mother stared with a set jaw, then her eyes flicked to Henrietta’s face with a hard, glittering expression. Without a word, she stood and walked to the fire and then placed the portrait into the flames.

“Mama, no!”

Henrietta rushed to the fire and reached in to grasp the portrait, but her mother held onto her and pulled her back.

“No, my dear. I want all of your hopes and feelings for that man to burn with that drawing. He has done enough mischief to your future.” She spun Henrietta to face her and shook her. “Do you hear? It is done! George Strathom is NOT for you! He is but the second son of a baronet—he has nothing of his own except maybe a horse or two. Certainly nothing to support a wife or a family.”

She waited until the edges of the portrait had curled black with flames licking along the outer edge, then released her daughter. Henrietta watched through her tears the eyes staring back at her from the encroaching flames. Then, they were gone with the rest, breaking into black flaking ashes.

Lady Loughton turned and left the room, taking the parures with her. Henrietta sat beside the fire, watching until the last embers cooled and the portrait had disintegrated with the rest of the ashes.

She did not go down to breakfast the next morning. She got up slowly, drank a cup of tea and nibbled on some toast, but pushed away the egg. Hatcher came in and took her tray, making a face at how little had been eaten. Henrietta drew her knees up and rested her chin on them.

Suddenly, there was a commotion and her door burst open. Her mother stood there and said, "Hurry, child, and dress! Lord Charles is here!"

She continued in place, wringing her hands, as Hatcher set the tray down and went to the wardrobe. She started to pull out one of the dresses, but Lady Loughton motioned her aside. She went through the dresses hanging there and pulled out the turquoise silk gown.

"Quickly, and cinch her corset well!" She looked at Henrietta who was slowly swinging her legs out of bed and said, "Get up, girl! He is here!" Then she sailed out of the room.

Henrietta stood and allowed Hatcher to dress her, then there was time to be spent fixing her hair. Finally, her simple pearl necklace was fastened about her throat and she rose to go down to meet Lord Charles.

He was standing, and she seemed to surprise him and her mother in deep discussion. Her gaze went from one to the other and she curtsied. She sat on the settee just opposite the chair he finally settled into. Her mother glanced at each before leaving just as they were seated, and Henrietta watched her go in alarm.

By the time she turned back to Lord Charles, he was in the process of kneeling before her. In typical fashion, he endeavored to complete the act while straightening his back and lifting his chin, to such an extent as to appear perfectly erect.

"Miss Darrow, I have watched you these many months with increasing pleasure. I am now assured of your eminent suitability as a wife and the future Lady Charles Tymonds. Please do me the honor of accepting my proposal of marriage."

Her hand was caught, and her heart was hammering in terror. *No, no, no...* was all she could think. He was looking at her as though he had no doubt her answer would be an ecstatic affirmative, but she was so shocked she could not formulate any words.

Just then, her mother came in and fluttered toward them. "Oh Henrietta, thank the gentleman for the honor. I apologize, Lord Charles, she is likely struck dumb with amazement. Please give us time to consider your proposal."

He stood abruptly, obviously confused by Henrietta's mute reaction. "Of course, of course. I can see that I have surprised your daughter this morning. Such humility is gratifying. I must have hidden my intentions extremely closely as she does not seem to be aware of them. Certainly, I will give you time and I will await your response."

He bowed, but lingered as though expecting Henrietta to suddenly accede to his request. She did not, silently grateful for once for her mother's intervention.

He left, bowing once more and she was left shaking from the shock.

Her mother came back after seeing him out and cried, "Oh, Henrietta! Oh, I knew how it would be! Such a gentleman! We must go to your father and tell him..."

"No."

Lady Loughton paused and looked at her quizzically. "I beg pardon? What do you mean? We must tell your father."

"No. No. I will not marry him. I would have told him so...but..."

"What do you mean, no?! Of course, you will accept him."

"No. I will not."

Lady Loughton stepped out of the room. She returned many minutes later with Lord Loughton. "My dear, I do wish you would tell me what this is about. Oh hello, Henrietta. You seem unwell this morning, what is wrong?"

"Tell him. Tell him what has just happened." Henrietta opened her mouth to speak, but her mother interjected, "Lord Charles Tymonds has just asked for her hand in marriage and she is now saying she will not have him."

Henrietta stood silent, her cheeks two spots of color. Lord Loughton turned to her and said, "Is this true?"

"Yes, Father."

"Is he still in the house?" he asked, casting about.

"No, sir."

"And you have refused him?" He looked at her very intently.

"No, sir. Mama asked him to give me time."

"I see." He seemed to consider, and his wife began talking.

"Thank goodness I did! We still have a chance to salvage this!"

"And, Henrietta, do you think with time..." Her father trailed off.

"No. I will not marry him," she said with finality.

Lady Loughton clasped her hands together in front of her bosom and her eyes glittered. "Henrietta—you are so nearly there. Just a little more and you will be mistress of the Season with an engagement and a glorious future."

Henrietta broke at that point. "No, Madam. I will not marry him! I dislike him and his ways and have given my heart to another who you have refused me. I will not marry to oblige you! I will not marry Lord Charles."

"Henrietta!" Her father's voice was sharp. "Do not forget who you are speaking to. We cannot force you, nor would we. But I will ask you to consider your decision very carefully." She made to speak but he held up his hand. "Consider. Think. That is all I am asking of you and it is not very much. You have several days until your ball. You can give your answer in the next few. That should be adequate for Lord Charles."

Her throat closed off as she tried to swallow. Unable to speak, she nodded and then managed to choke out, "May I be excused?"

He sighed and nodded.

She walked past them both and then ran up the stairs to her room, collapsing onto her bed and crying in a mixture of anger and frustration.

Dragging in breaths against the tightly cinched corset, she desperately tried to unbutton her gown but could not reach all the buttons. Clawing in a panic, she heard the fabric rip and she screamed in frustration with it.

The door burst open a minute later, with Hatcher and her mother there. It was Hatcher's arms that went around her to calm her and stop her hands from tearing further at the dress.

"Miss, Miss, let me—I've got it. Please, Miss..."

Swiftly, she unbuttoned what was left of the bodice and then loosened the corset before securing it once more.

Lady Loughton lifted the dress and tossed it aside with a disgusted sound. "Ruined! One of your best and it is ruined! What is wrong with you, girl?!"

Henrietta was bent over, gasping in air and sobbing great racking sobs in a choking manner. Her hand flailed backward toward her mother and she stamped her foot. "Leave me alone," she said finally. "Just leave me alone."

"We certainly will! And you had best do as your father instructed and think about what you have done this morning. I pray you don't undo all our hard work!"

The door closed behind her and Hatcher gently led her to the vanity and began taking pins out of her hair. She slowly and calmly brushed Henrietta's hair while she sat in her underthings, her corset loosened to allow her easy breaths.

Henrietta's sobs gradually softened to occasional sniffs and her hot tears stopped flowing. By the time Hatcher was done dressing her hair simply, her eyes were dry and her heart was empty of all feeling.

She caught her maid's eye in the glass. "Thank you."

Hatcher nodded and said only, "Of course, Miss." She patted her mistress' hair and helped her into the dressing gown. Then she left, picking up the torn dress as she went.

Henrietta pulled the edges of the dressing gown around her and drew her feet up onto the seat. She buried her face in her knees and drew in a ragged breath. She wished she could look at George's portrait, but the curled flakes of blackened ash were all that was left of it. She hadn't realized how much comfort she had gotten from such a simple thing, but now even that had been denied to her.

She stayed in her room for the remainder of the day, refusing all food that was brought to her. Her mother came once, sat on the foot of the bed and was silent for a moment, staring at the floor. Henrietta's eyes dropped to her hands, then she lifted her face and waited.

Her mother seemed a little uncomfortable. Then she said, "My dear, I understand this is very difficult. The pressures of the Season are not inconsequential. But, however, you must stay strong. You must try to rise above it."

"Thank you, Mama. I am trying," she said emptily.

“I know. And I know you will continue to do so.”

Henrietta nodded and waited.

“Have you given any thought to Lord Charles’ proposal?”

“I have.”

“And?” Her mother’s expression was hopeful.

“It is not within my power to accept.”

“I see.” She turned away, disappointment spreading over her face and then stood. “I will inform your father and write to Lord Charles myself.”

“Thank you, Mama,” she answered softly, relieved.

Lady Loughton made to leave, then paused at the door. “Henrietta, you will have to marry one day. I hope you do not plan to refuse every young man who petitions for your hand. You may not receive another such opportunity. Choose wisely, my dear. There are so few things we have any control over.” Then she was gone.

Chapter Sixteen

George sat with his mother in the fine carriage, swaying side-to-side with the rough road. Remy had gone ahead to make the arrangements and they were riding to Welridge for a few days' visit and tour of the mills. They were but a few hours out and his mother had been uncharacteristically quiet for the majority of the trip.

Observing her, he noted the fine lines of tension about her eyes and mouth. The skin there was thin, thinner than he remembered and the hair springing back from her forehead was a little faded, a tiny bit grayer than it had been. His mother had never gone into a cap, and wore her hair uncovered as a younger woman would. He smiled at her.

She caught him staring and said with an uncertain expression, "Is something wrong?"

"Not at all. I was just wondering when I am to wish you joy," he said with a speculative expression.

"Don't be ridiculous." She turned away quickly and presumed to stare out the window.

"Mother, I can see you two are courting. I just do not know what to do about it."

"There is nothing for you to do except continue to be courteous and respectful," she said, continuing to stare at the countryside.

"Do you have an understanding?"

After a moment, she said, "Yes, I believe so. It has been awkward, though."

"Why?" George was taken aback.

"Well, there's you, and he has grown children from his late wife."

"So he is a widower," he said.

"Yes. For many years, now." She turned her attention back to George.

"Have you met his children?" he asked. The thought of having stepsiblings was a surprise.

His mother's eyes narrowed slightly, then widened as she answered in a gentler voice, "His sons manage the mills. This will be my first time meeting them."

"And you are apprehensive?" he ventured. "Obviously. I am too old to be

put on display.” The edginess was back.

“Surely it is not quite so bad...”

“He is very fond of his sons.”

“Well, Mother. They will like us or they won’t. We won’t be that worse off if they don’t.”

She tried to smile, but couldn’t, and he realized just how much she cared about this. As a woman, she had little option but to marry in order to be free of her titled stepson, William. As an aging woman, she had few options in the marriage market. That she had found Remy must have seemed like a miracle to her.

She cleared her throat delicately. “And you...when am I to wish you joy?”

“Well, Mother, since you ventured there, let me tell you that she has already refused me.”

Delia stopped and spun around. “What?!”

“I asked, she refused.”

Her face became red with anger. “That silly girl, what is she about? Leading you on and then...”

“She did not lead me on, Mother.”

“She most certainly has! A woman knows, George!”

“Well, whatever her reasons, you may now put her out of your mind. She doesn’t want the likes of me.”

“Well, then, the girl doesn’t deserve you.”

They relapsed into silence, his mother seeming to prefer it and, indeed, George did no less.

His thoughts were full of Henrietta, and yet he tried to banish her from his mind. He knew that she would be preparing for her ball, which was to be in the next few evenings. He wished he could see her, be there to applaud and support her on that special evening. But he had not been invited, and even if he was in London, it would not be.

He glanced down at his hands in his lap, then lifted one to rub the side of his head. It still ached from time to time. At least by going to Welridge, he could support his mother in this.

The carriage slowed as they neared the city and its somewhat congested streets. There was a haze of smokiness that recalled London. He saw his mother’s expression as she looked out over the city. While London seemed busy, vibrant, and cosmopolitan, Welridge was crowded yet provincial, busy yet everything seemed to go slowly—a contradiction in appearance and atmosphere.

They finally pulled up to a fine house, similar in size to Lincoln House, but with more grounds about it. The carriage door was opened, and they stepped out into the slightly hazy air of the city as Remy came to meet them. He kissed Delia on both cheeks, then shook George’s hand. Gesturing toward the door, he swept them inside before him.

They were shown first to their rooms to rest and change before supper. The rooms were well appointed, though without the old-world elegance of Lincoln House or the medieval grace of Tredwell Abbey. This was a more modern home for a man with recent wealth. George was slightly relieved to find that his small manor could stand the comparison with Remy Vansittart's. Well, at least one of Remy's houses.

Supper was excellent, and the Vansittart sons and their families were there to welcome them. One son, Thomas, was the eldest and seemed like a miniature Remy. He had a quick wit, and his children were quite well-disciplined. It was obvious that his wife was not the disciplinarian. Yet she seemed a calm and doting mother, not unintelligent.

The other son, Robert, was shorter and slighter and took after his mother. Slower in manner and speech, very careful in his movements, he was nonetheless a deep thinker. He was as of yet unmarried, and there was no mention of any engagement.

The brothers seemed to get along quite well, and there was a light atmosphere to the gathering.

Robert glanced up from entertaining a small nephew and asked, "And how is our Jemima?"

"Still sewing. She has a shop, now," Remy said.

"A shop? Father, you didn't!" Robert mock-scolled him.

"She was very set on it. Your aunt asked me to look after her, so I do. She is, supposedly, quite talented."

"She needs a husband," Robert said into his glass.

"Agreed, but you will have to convince her of that since I have made no headway there." He glanced at George as he said this.

Thomas looked across the table. "So, what do you do, George?"

Delia answered for him. "Just now, he is taking in the Season."

Thomas raised his eyebrows and formed a silent, "Oh."

"I am considering the Infantry, as a career," George said.

Robert shot a glance to his father and said, "Hang around Father for long enough and he will have you managing a mill."

"I know so little of the industry, but I will be happy to improve myself."

Thomas considered him, then seemed to come to a decision and nodded. He then turned to Delia and asked, "Lady Strathom, I understand you have another son."

"Yes, William is the eldest. He has an estate in East Yorkshire, a village called Lytchley."

Thomas' wife, Caroline, asked, "What is his estate called?"

"Tredwell Abbey."

"Oh, it sounds quite gothic!"

George laughed. "It does have a sort of medieval grace to it."

"Is it very large and rambling, as in Mrs. Radcliffe's novels?"

"No, nothing so romantic. It is a comfortable manor house, though, with

excellent stables.”

“What sort of industry is there?”

“Nothing like Welridge, mostly farming and sheep. Lytchley does a great deal with wool, I believe.”

“We have an excellent wool mill here in Welridge, as well. I wouldn’t be surprised to find Lytchley wool making its way to Hertfordshire!”

“As your cousin, Miss Saunders, would say—a small world indeed!”

The evening progressed and Delia relaxed somewhat. George smiled to himself. He took great pleasure observing how she worked her charm on Remy, as well as his sons. She even complimented Caroline on her dress, which was made out of cotton from their mill, and declared her desire for one very like it. By the time the evening ended and George headed up to bed, he felt that his mother had little to fear.

The next day started early, and they were called to breakfast before they were used to. Remy had to be at the mills for meetings and had arranged for tours while he conducted business. The carriage crawled through the busy streets as they made their way to the first mill. Delia seemed apprehensive, and Remy kept patting her hand awkwardly as though to reassure her.

They pulled up to a large, sprawling building with a gate going into a courtyard beyond. The gate was open, and they rode through. People were milling around one of the doors and all stopped to stare at them as they disembarked from the carriage. Once they caught sight of Remy, faces were averted. They were shown into a rather grimy office, where Thomas stood in consultation with one of his men.

He broke off at sight of them and stepped over. “Well, are we ready, then?”

Remy nodded to them and went into the inner office, leaving Thomas to take them around. They spent the next hour viewing the cotton milling process from beginning to end.

They started with the boiler room, which generated the power to turn the engines of the machines. Cotton came in large bales and was sorted and cleaned and spun. Some was dyed and then some was woven depending upon the style and quality of the yarn or thread spun. When they were through, there was a luncheon spread out in one of the finer meeting rooms, and Vansittart joined them.

George was impressed in spite of himself, and envied Thomas’ obvious enthusiasm for the process. His mother seemed delighted with the quality of some of the fabric and mentioned repeatedly speaking to Miss Saunders about making her a cotton gown.

Then it was time to return to the house, and Delia remarked she was quite ready for a rest. Before they left, Remy pulled her aside for a moment’s tête-à-tête and she was very thoughtful when she returned to the company.

The ride to the Vansittart home was quiet. Both were tired from their tour and lost to their own thoughts. George was fighting a strong desire to return to

London, tempered with a need to avoid a confrontation with Henrietta or her family. He closed his eyes and determined to stay where he was for the time being.

The afternoon was spent resting. George wandered through the library, noting that it wasn't as broad as his own, but acknowledged that long days supervising the mill probably left little time for collecting or even reading books. Nevertheless, he found an interesting treatise lying on one of the desks regarding the development of the steam engine and spent a pleasant afternoon improving his understanding.

He dressed carefully for supper, in deference to his host. Several friends of the family were going to be joining them for the meal and he wanted to ensure that he did not embarrass his mother's friend.

Staring through the glass of the window, he realized that after tomorrow, around this same time of day, Henrietta would be looking in her mirror before heading out to face all the guests at her ball.

He snapped free of his reverie and turned on his heels, heading downstairs.

His mother was on Remy's arm when he entered the main room, and a couple of guests were already there and were in the process of being introduced to her.

Remy turned as he entered and raised a hand to include him. "And this is her younger son, Mr. George Strathom."

George stepped up and bowed to the ladies, then shook hands with the men. His mother was looking very well, dressed rather better than the occasion called for and carrying herself with real elegance. George caught her eye and nodded, receiving a genuine smile in return.

Then they were swept into another whirlwind of introductions as more people arrived. The evening became a long succession of business discussions, explanations, and the list of courses for supper. There was a point, however, when Remy stood and tapped his glass. The table went quiet and all eyes turned to him.

"As you know, I have been alone these many years, and uncomplainingly so. How could I be otherwise, when there could not possibly exist another woman who could captivate me and accompany me on this life's journey. That, however, has changed. I have been so fortunate as to earn the love and acceptance of a remarkable and beautiful woman, and she has agreed to marry me. I give you, Lady Strathom!"

Glasses were raised in their honor and George raised his own before he even had a chance to process what he had actually heard. His mother's eyes caught his, and he read uncertainty there, and understood. He smiled and tipped his glass toward her and she lifted her head with pride then.

George drank, listening to the congratulations flowing from everyone present. He added his own and surveyed the people his mother was allying her life with.

He considered. They were wealthy, which she would value. And yet, she was more stylish and elegant than any of them, and he felt that was something this family would value. She would always stand out here, always be looked up to. Perhaps, he thought, she had found the perfect man with which to unite her destiny.

The evening was joyful and filled with many expostulations of good will. George was clapped on the back more than once, and his sore ribs had quite a time of it.

At one point, his mother singled him out and said in a low voice, “You don’t mind terribly, do you, George?”

“No, Mother, why should I? He is a worthy man and you deserve to be happy.”

“It is just that I know how much you admired your father...”

“I always will. He was my father. But I can still honor and esteem a stepfather. And I do.”

She placed her hand on his arm and reached up to kiss him lightly on the cheek. “Thank you, George.”

He watched her return to Remy’s side and shortly after the party began to break up as the guests started to depart. He waited until all except Robert had left and excused himself. He was suddenly exhausted and ready for some quiet.

The next day was a repetition of the first, except they toured the second mill, which seemed to focus more on the production of cloth than the first mill. George smiled to himself to see his mother adopt some semblance of ownership as they toured. She asked questions, listened intently, and generally behaved as though she was a queen on display for her subjects.

Remy joined them once again for luncheon, and they returned to the house for a quiet afternoon and supper.

They were due to leave the following day, but his mother came to him and begged to remain for a few days longer.

“I understand if you need to return to London, and Remy said he can easily spare the carriage to take you home.”

“Nonsense, I can go by the Post.”

Her chin lifted. “Remy will never agree to that. I will tell him you will be taking the carriage home tomorrow.”

“If you would rather I stayed...”

“Of course not. Go home, you have your heart set on it, I can see.”

He nodded. “All right, then, Mother.”

The next day saw him setting off alone to return to London. It was a quiet trip without his mother, giving him more time to think than he really wanted. He would be home in time for the ball. Not that he was going, but a part of him wanted to at least be in London.

The carriage pulled up to his house and he stepped out, saw to his bags being taken in, and went inside. He glanced through the post, and an elegant

and familiar hand caught his eye. With a slight frown, he opened it and read the handwritten words there inviting him to Miss Darrow's ball to be held that very evening. Somehow, he doubted that Lady Loughton was aware of this particular invitation being sent.

His gaze caught his reflection of the glass and he grinned to himself. Well, he had not responded, but he could always claim that he had. It would be a small lie.

He looked at the clock—there was just enough time to get ready...

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Henrietta stood in front of her mirror. She wore a white gown, cut low across her bust, and sapphires gleamed at her neck and ears. The sapphire sash made her seem taller than usual, and rosettes peeked out from under her skirt. Her hair was arranged around a small tiara.

She hardly recognized herself, used as she was to her own appearance. She tried to smile and felt a little artificial. But then, that was what the night seemed to be made for.

She went to the top of the stairs and stared down. Her mother happened to glance up just then and her hand went to her throat. Henrietta took a breath and then glided gently down the stairs, under the proud watch of both her parents.

Her father met her at the bottom and took both her hands in his. "My dear, you look exquisite."

"Thank you, Papa."

They went to the entryway to await the first of their guests. Henrietta's nerves slowly calmed as the three went through the familiar motions. Greetings, introductions, pleasantries. Henrietta felt disconnected from it all, somehow.

The Abernethys arrived, accompanied by their cousin D'Courcy. He very quickly asked for the first two dances, but she was able to defer, having already been approached by the young Viscount Kittering. He was quick to apply for the next, which she could only agree to.

The greetings seemed interminable, but the flow of guests gradually slowed. She was about to turn and move into the ballroom, but one last guest was announced. She turned to see George Strathom taking the last step up to her father.

He looked splendid, and her heart lifted seeing him. She did not hazard a glance at her mother; she could feel the cold anger emanating from her. Her hands were still clasped in front of her and were not offered.

"I was most happy to find your invitation upon my return from Hertfordshire," he said.

"I do not recall sending one," Lady Loughton said. "However, there were so many, I suppose yours just slipped my memory."

"Perhaps that is so." He smiled, though his eyes were only for Henrietta.

He lingered over her hand, and said, "I am sure the first is taken, but I am hoping to dance with you sometime tonight."

"I, too. The third, if you are available."

"The third," he affirmed as he slowly released her hand.

He offered his arm to escort her to the ballroom and she delicately laid her hand on his. Then, they followed the Loughtons. Pride rose in his breast to have her on his arm even for so short a time.

The orchestra was beginning to play, and Viscount Kittering arrived to claim her. George moved to watch as Henrietta opened her own ball. She all but floated to the center of the room. One by one, the other couples drifted out to join her and her partner as the band struck up the opening chords. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Miss Abernethy on the arm of her cousin, D'Courcy.

He had no desire to dance that night, save with Henrietta. He could not keep his eyes off of her, so ethereal and enchanting did she appear. Her partner did not dance particularly well, but nothing could detract from her. If anything, his clumsiness only enhanced her elegance. He watched as she danced the first with Kittering, then D'Courcy claimed her.

He turned to find Miss Abernethy near, and he nodded to her. She bit her lip as she nodded to him and seemed ready to be asked to dance, but he merely smiled and turned his attention back to Henrietta.

The crowd milled around, the floor filling with couples and making it difficult to follow Henrietta's progress. Miss Abernethy went by on the arm of another man and he was secretly relieved. Then, just as the dance was ending, he saw where Henrietta was and began making his way over to her.

D'Courcy was bent over her and George did not know how the young man could persist in the face of such a discouraging expression. Her relief was palpable when George stepped in front of them.

Cecil's head snapped up and he gave George a very unfriendly look before leaving Henrietta's side.

George gave her his arm and led her to the floor, saying as they went, "What was that young man saying to give you such a disagreeable expression?"

Henrietta closed her eyes and sighed. "A marriage proposal."

"What! In the middle of a dance?"

"He said he feared I would be engaged by another soon if he did not speak his mind or heart, I do not recall his exact words."

"Well, he is certainly a better catch than me."

"He is still free to be caught!"

"I am glad to hear it."

She was silent, though they danced smoothly together for a few minutes.

"Are you tiring?" he asked.

"Does it show?" She let her exhaustion show on her face for a mere moment.

“I don’t think anyone but myself would see it.”

“I believe you are right. But there is nothing to do, except what needs to be done,” she said wearily.

“Well, despite your feelings, you look extraordinary tonight.”

She smiled up at him, and he returned it.

“I was most happy to see your invitation when I returned from Hertfordshire,” he said.

“Hertfordshire?”

“My mother’s beau took us there for a few days, and she promptly got engaged while we were there.”

“Indeed! That is excellent news—is it not?”

“I think so. He is a good man and seems to care for her. She seems happy.”

“Then I am glad.”

They switched partners for a move, then came back together and he said, “I do not see Lord Charles this evening.”

She reddened. “No. I imagine he did not feel himself able to attend.”

His gaze sharpened on her, and she studiously avoided his eyes and went red. The corner of his mouth crooked upward. Her color returned to normal after a few minutes, and the dance ended.

George bowed to her, she curtseyed, and was soon claimed by another man. He stood and watched as she was led away.

Two other proposals, at least. Both of them better in her parents’ eyes than he was. That she had refused both, he did not doubt. His heart was singing, and he went to stand beside one of the windows.

He was not there for long before Lady Loughton approached. “Mr. Strathom.”

“Lady Loughton.”

“I am at a loss as to why you are here.”

“I received an invitation.”

“You must know I did not send it.”

“Madam, if I have erred, then I apologize. I thought I was invited.”

“If I asked you to leave, would you go?”

“Of course.”

“Then I am requesting that you leave.”

He started back as though struck, but recovered quickly and nodded. Without another word, he headed toward the door that led from the ballroom and then found his way to the entryway where he requested his gig be brought round.

As he stood outside, waiting, he glanced up at the windows and saw Lady Loughton watching him. He turned away and stepped toward his gig as it was brought up.

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Henrietta was finally able to escape her partner with only a bruised toe and a small tear in the hem of her gown where he had trod on it. She spun around, searching over the heads of the milling crowd for one head in particular, but did not see it.

Her mother came up and whispered, "What are you doing?"

"Just looking."

"Well, stop it. He isn't here."

"Who?"

"You know quite well. He found it best if he left, and he did."

"He left....?" She stared for a moment, then said, "You asked him to leave, didn't you?"

"If I did, I would have done no wrong. He was not supposed to have been invited."

"Mama!" she cried out.

Just then, the Viscount Kittering returned to beg for another dance. Her mother acquiesced for her and Henrietta was whisked away to the dance floor, heartsick and angry. She only tangentially heard what the viscount was saying.

"And then, at my mother's behest, the surgeon undertook a very dangerous operation on the inflamed organ which, thankfully, I survived. And then, of course, I had to recover from the procedure, which you may be sure was a long and painful undertaking. Thankfully, my mother has studied nursing. Indeed, her ministrations are invaluable to our tenants and to the poor of our parish."

"I am well aware of the outcomes of a mother's interventions."

He frowned, uncertain of her meaning, but continued, "And so, you see me here, partaking at last of the Season with my doctor's affirmation of good health."

"That is wonderful news, Lord Kittering." She stepped and swished her skirt aside to prevent it being trodden upon.

"My dear mother accompanied me tonight and is most impressed with you."

"I am glad, she seems an excellent woman." Henrietta longed for the end of this particular dance.

"Indeed, she has already commented upon how well we dance and suggests I call upon you in the next couple of days to have a private conversation." He looked meaningfully at her and Henrietta frowned.

Surely this is not a second proposal this evening!

"I thank your mother, and yourself, but I do not meet privately with gentlemen," she said, and smiled inwardly at the confusion this statement brought to the viscount's face.

He made a misstep and apologized, then seemed to be trying to determine how to respond.

"When I say privately, I merely mean under the appropriate supervision

of your chaperone.” He had to hurry somewhat to catch up to the place he was supposed to be.

“Oh, well, that all seems quite appropriate. I am sure if you approach my mother, who governs my schedule, she will tell you if I am available for such a visit.”

He seemed taken aback by her lack of encouragement and was frowning at this point, small beads of perspiration breaking out on his forehead. “Well, I shall certainly discuss it with your mother, then,” he said as the dance ended.

He bowed to her and disappeared into the crowd, leaving her to make her own way to the refreshments table. She glanced over and saw the viscount standing beside a rather heavysset woman with a hawk’s gaze who was conversing with Lady Loughton.

Her mother happened to glance her way and seemed to be weighing how best to answer the pair. She said something graciously that seemed to placate the viscount and his mother, and they left. She made her way very purposefully toward Henrietta.

“Viscount Kittering plans to call on the day after tomorrow,” she announced in an undertone.

“Yes. So he intimated during our dance.” Henrietta picked up her cup.

“I saw no reason to absolutely forbid the visit, though I am of little doubt to its outcome.”

“Yes, Mama.” Henrietta sipped her punch.

“Will you promise me to at least consider it?” There was a worried light in Lady Loughton’s eye.

“Of course, Mama.”

Henrietta set the cup down as a young man came to request her company for the next dance. She allowed herself to be led off without a backward look at her mother.

Chapter Seventeen

Henrietta stifled a yawn and glanced at the clock. It had been hours since George had left, and she had hardly spoken to her mother in all that time. She wondered if it would be terribly rude of her to leave her own ball and go to bed. Surely, she would be forgiven—it was past three already.

One glance at her mother and she knew the answer. That formidable lady was pushing her with her intense look to go and mingle or dance or anything other than stand by the punch bowl, yawning.

She moved toward a group of young ladies who were clustered by the wall. These were the same young ladies she had worked so hard all night to ensure had partners and were dancing when at all possible. She was sad to see that Augusta had joined them.

“Well, ladies, still standing?”

She caught one or two hands snatched from yawns and they all nodded enthusiastically.

“These are long nights, are they not?”

She received more nods, but no other responses.

A couple of hardy gentlemen came forward and petitioned Henrietta, but she declined. They then selected two of the young ladies who went off happily to dance. Henrietta smiled and moved on.

She glanced over the dance floor, happy that her ball had gone so well and her mother most likely would have little to complain of. Except, of course, that she had now refused two offers. Three if you included the imminent refusal of Viscount Kittering. Well, four if you included George, but she didn’t include George. That, in her mind, wasn’t an actual refusal. Perhaps in her heart of hearts she believed that if she went home to Lytchley still unengaged, then her parents’ views toward him would soften. She sobered as she considered the likelihood of that.

She glanced up to see Lady Cassandra’s tall form nearby and she acknowledged her with a guarded smile. She seemed about to say something, so Henrietta paused, and Lady Cassandra fell into step as though inclined to take a turn about the room with her.

She linked her arm with Henrietta’s. “I must congratulate you on a successful ball.”

“Thank you, I hope you have enjoyed yourself,” she replied, unable to withdraw.

They stepped together along the outer rim of the room.

“I was surprised not to see Lord Charles Tymonds here,” Lady Cassandra said in a rather speculative tone.

“I too. He was certainly invited,” Henrietta said innocently.

“I understand he paid you a visit earlier in the week.”

“Why, yes, yes he did.” If Henrietta was surprised at Lady Cassandra’s statement, she did not show it.

“I wondered if his absence might have something to do with the outcome of that visit.”

Henrietta’s jaw nearly fell agape at the blatantly intrusive remark. Instead, however, she merely replied, “I can’t think what transpired that would precipitate his absence, but I am sorry he was unable to attend.”

Lady Cassandra’s lips pressed together momentarily in subdued vexation. Henrietta smiled to herself. *Let her be vexed.* She would not be cowed into revealing such personal information as a refused proposal.

Lady Cassandra tried another tack. “I noticed that Mr. D’Courcy has left already.”

“Oh, has he? Goodness, I have been remiss.”

“He had the audacity to declare his intentions for me some weeks ago. I am afraid I refused him rather summarily.”

“How trying for you.”

“Indeed.”

They had completed a circuit of the room and Lady Cassandra apparently felt that she had tried hard enough to wrinkle some potential gossip out of Henrietta, for she nodded and split off to rejoin her chaperone and one or two other highly eligible young ladies.

Henrietta had to laugh to herself at D’Courcy—he seemed to have begun with the highest prospect and had been working his way down to her. She wondered just how many proposals he had offered so far during the Season.

The evening finally began drawing to a close and she gratefully accepted the thanks and well wishes of the exiting parties. Finally, the servants began moving in to set the house to rights and to carry off the punch and leftovers to the servants’ tables below. She yawned and made her way to her room, hoping to avoid her mother. She also wanted to be done undressing so that Hatcher could join the others downstairs after helping her.

She slept until the early afternoon, waking in time for luncheon, which she took in her room. Her mother had purposefully kept the calendar free for a couple of days to allow them to recover.

She dressed slowly and walked downstairs to find everything already set mostly to rights. She wandered into the parlor and sat at the piano, then played a few bars. Her voice rose softly in an Irish love song and she played through, mostly from memory. She checked the music, then played it through again

and nodded to herself. It would make a good addition to her repertoire.

She stood, restless all of a sudden and went in search of Mrs. Daggett. She found her in the smaller sitting room beside the steady fire burning there, working on something obviously intended for the chapel.

“Mrs. Daggett, I wonder if you would care to take a walk with me.”

Looking up, she removed the needle from her mouth and said, “Oh, certainly. That is, if it could wait a few minutes? Then I could finish this up.”

“Of course. I will go up and fetch my cloak and bonnet and we can set off whenever you are ready.”

“Thank you, my dear!”

Henrietta smiled and went to her room. She settled a bonnet over her hair and secured it, then pulled her cloak around her shoulders and fastened it. Satisfied with what she saw, she went back downstairs and lingered in the entrance, waiting for Mrs. Daggett.

The good lady finally came forward, buttoning her expansive pelisse and drawing a large shawl over her shoulders. Then they stepped out into the cold, early spring air.

There was a small public garden nearby, and the two ladies walked automatically toward it. It was loud on the street with the wheels of cabs and carriages rattling by on the cobblestones and the relentless clapping of hooves against the fixed stones. Mrs. Daggett was puffing a little by the time they reached it, but once there, the atmosphere calmed. The trees provided a buffer to the busy sounds of the streets.

They wandered peacefully along, marveling at the beds of crocuses already shooting little heads up from the soil and blooming in a burst of color. Daffodils and lilies were also reaching up from their beds and sending out blooms of yellow and white. Henrietta noted that within a couple of weeks there would be a riot of early spring flowers in town. A part of her wondered what Lychley would look like coming to life after the long winter, and she felt a strong stab of homesickness.

As they neared one end of the garden, she noted a carriage come to a standstill out of the corner of one eye. She turned her head toward it and frowned at its behavior. The driver kept casting around, and the curtains on the door were closed, but someone was holding it open a crack and peeking through. She stared directly at the window and it was pulled closed once more and a thump resounded. The driver then slapped the reins on the back of the horse and off they went.

“Well, that was odd,” she said, almost to herself.

Mrs. Daggett heard, however, and replied, “Oh, my dear, here in London there are so many very odd things!”

“Hmmm,” Henrietta said. “Perhaps we should return home, now.”

They made their way to the road, and then carefully across and around the corner to their own street. As they were walking, she glanced up. The same carriage was coming around the corner toward them. She pulled back in

time to see it go past and to note its rather shabby and outdated exterior. For a moment, she was reminded of George's family carriage, but dismissed it instantly. The Strathom family carriage could never be called shabby.

It was with relief that she shut the door to Radford House behind her. Mrs. Daggett returned to her place by the fire. Henrietta went to write some letters, and found her mother going through the post.

"Well, my dear, had a nice walk?"

"Yes, Mama." She toyed with the idea of telling her mother about the odd carriage, but decided against it. Her mother would probably react by forbidding her walks.

"Rather full week coming up." She tapped her calendar. "And you have a couple of letters."

Henrietta picked up her letters and went to sit by the fire to read them. One was from Penelope, telling of her own coming to London for a few weeks. The other was from Eliza, telling of her experiences as Lady Strathom. She smiled over both and reread them.

Then, she heard her mother rise and say, "Time to dress for supper, Henrietta."

She collected her letters and made her way upstairs where Hatcher was waiting. She had already pulled out her pale blue silk gown. Henrietta waited while her afternoon dress was slowly lifted off and her corset adjusted before the silk was lowered over her uplifted arms. The smooth fabric clung to her shoulders and through the bodice. Hatcher tweaked a curl here and there before allowing her to rise and go down to supper.

She paused in the hall outside the dining room. She could hear her parents talking quietly within. Their stilted, disinterested tones went back and forth before lapsing into silence. It caused a weight to bear down upon her. She had always known her parents did not love each other. As she had grown older, their loveless partnership had only spurred her to desire something different for herself. Now, as she stood in the empty hallway, she wondered if perhaps that was not meant to be.

The next day was rainy and cold and Henrietta stared at the weather with a disheartened expression. They had a very full day of carriage travel and it would be difficult to keep her best slippers dry. She ate her breakfast then dressed for the formal 'breakfast' she would attend.

When she got downstairs, she found Mrs. Daggett in her morning best and waiting. "Oh, Henrietta, your mother has a slight cold and has asked me to go with you this morning."

"Oh. Lovely, Helen. Is mother very ill?"

"No, but she felt she could miss a breakfast."

"Perhaps I should just step in and say good morning while you call the carriage."

She stepped quickly up the stairs to her mother's room and peered in.

Her mother was propped up in bed, reading her morning correspondence.

“Oh, Henrietta. Sorry, my dear, to miss the Bedenfelts’ breakfast, but I am sure you will be all right.”

“Of course, Mama. I just wanted to say good morning and see how you were feeling.”

“Oh, well, my head is very ill this morning and I have a bad throat. But, however, a day of rest and I have no doubt I will be much better.”

“Well, then, I will leave you to rest.”

She very gently closed the door and stepped lightly down the stairs to where Mrs. Daggett was waiting. The footman ferried each of them to the carriage beneath an umbrella, and after seeing them in, secured the door. Henrietta clucked at the slight water mark on her slippers but reasoned that once it dried, few would notice.

The Bedenfelts’ home was near Kensington and it was a large, modern house. They waited in the carriage as a footman rushed up with an umbrella and escorted them inside. Warmth and light erupted from the house as the doors were opened and Henrietta gladly divested herself of her cloak. They mingled for a while in a room with a large fireplace, and Henrietta gravitated toward Augusta who stood off by herself.

“What a dreary morning!”

“Indeed. I nearly stayed home, but Mother urged me to come out.” Augusta glanced nervously around the company.

“My dear Mama is ill this morning.” Henrietta linked her arm in Augusta’s as they were called in to the elaborate breakfast. “I do not see Lady Cassandra this morning...” she said as she gazed over the heads of the others.

“Did you not hear? She is engaged! Lord Charles Tymonds and she!”

Henrietta’s eyes flew open, and she chuckled. “No! I had not heard. Good for her. For them both, I suppose. She seems a strong enough character to defy him.”

Augusta frowned at this as they were seated.

The morning went as many of them went, socializing and eating, some playing and some singing, and then carriages were called again.

The rain was still coming down when they made their way to the carriage underneath the umbrella. She sighed in relief when she and Mrs. Daggett were ensconced back in their own carriage and the door was shut, closing off the morning’s activities with finality. The carriage lurched when they started off, something she attributed to the slippery stones of the street, and soon they were bouncing and swaying gently along.

Henrietta stared out the window past the trickles of rainwater tracing their way down the glass and out into the bustle of everyday London. Everyone seemed to be in their darkest clothes, as though in mourning, and the shades of umbrellas gave an even more somber cast to the city.

Mrs. Daggett was talking quietly about something in the background, but Henrietta did not pay her much mind. She leaned to her side, her forehead

resting on the glass as her breath lightly clouded the window.

As she was staring out, she noted a man on horseback come quickly up on her side, weaving in between the carriages and cabs. He veered right and nearly smashed into one of the cabs who pulled up just in time. The carriage behind, however, did not fare so well and the horses shied to the left of the stalled cab. The carriage jackknifed and tipped over, jerking the horses up against the trace and tossing them onto their sides. A tremendous shriek from the terrified horses split the air, followed by a loud crack as the trace snapped and was flung in a circular motion. The jagged ends of the wooden trace fell at chest level of the Loughton carriage and one of the horses impaled itself upon it, unable to stop in time.

The Loughton carriage skidded to one side and tossed Henrietta and Mrs. Daggett about. Then all was still, except the carriage rocked slightly as the injured horse thrashed against the wooden stake in its chest.

Henrietta opened the door, but one of the footmen said, "Stay in, Miss. You're better off in there." He was then gone toward the front.

Henrietta slid over to the other side to look out the window yet again and saw a mother and daughter emerging from the turned-over carriage. One had a bloody nose. People were running, and yet there were cabs still trying to force their way past the wreck.

Without thinking, she gathered her cloak about her and put the hood up, then opened the door and stepped out. She ran to the front of the carriage where men were trying to pull the broken trace free from the horse that was lying amidst a large pool of blood in the street. The footmen were trying to undo the harness and having a difficult time of it as the rain made the leather slippery. Umbrellas were being held over them as they worked.

The driver glanced around and saw her there. "Please, Miss, wait in the carriage while we sort this out." He advanced toward her with his arms spread as though to mask the images behind him.

"Is there any service I can render to the inhabitants of the other carriage?"

He looked grave and shook his head, and she returned to the carriage, her cloak now wet through and the chill seeping into her very bones. She sat back, and reached over to pat Mrs. Daggett, who was crying loudly.

"It is rather horrid, Helen, but we must be strong."

It was some time before the dead horse was dragged free of the harness and a fresh horse brought in and harnessed in tandem with the surviving horse. The new horse was a bay, and the other was a gray, and they were finally underway. The tipped-over carriage had been righted and was standing to one side of the road. In all that time, traffic had continued unabated in spite of the crowd of onlookers that had gathered about in hopes of seeing either loss of life or limb.

Henrietta and Mrs. Daggett were relieved when the carriage finally pulled up before Radford House and they were able to get into dry clothes and

warm rooms.

Mrs. Daggett sat beside the fire drinking tea and shuddering occasionally. Henrietta changed into an afternoon dress and checked on her mother, who was horrified to hear what had happened.

“Mother, I think I should send my regrets to the Allens for their evening party tonight.”

“Absolutely, my dear. I am sure that once they know the facts, they will not be angry. I will write them myself. You go and get something warm to drink.”

“Yes, Mama.”

She went downstairs and joined Mrs. Daggett, who was on her second cup of tea by then. She sat in front of the fire, its warmth barely reaching her as she had been so chilled through. There were several sore places on her body from where she had landed after being thrown in the crash, but she was thankful there was nothing more severe.

Mrs. Daggett looked up and tried to hide the tears glistening in her eyes.

Henrietta reached over and patted her knee yet again and said, “It has been a horrible day, Helen. Perhaps you should go to bed and rest.”

The older lady nodded gratefully, but said, “I don’t want to leave you all alone, my dear.”

Henrietta sighed. “I will be all right. I will probably go to bed soon, as well.”

Mrs. Daggett set her cup down and stood then walked heavily off toward her room, leaving Henrietta happily alone to stare into the fire.

She drew her feet up underneath her and cradled her cup of tea. Just then, there was a commotion, and the front door was opened. Her father burst into the room.

“I just heard, are you truly all right?”

“Yes, Papa, it was only the horse that was horribly injured.”

He came up to her and put his arms around her for a moment, then released her. “And Helen?”

“She is well—I just sent her to bed as she is still somewhat shaken.”

“I would imagine so. Damn careless cabbies!”

“Our horse...”

“Yes, it has been seen to. Luckily the carriage is not badly damaged. I will need to purchase another pair of horses. I hope you don’t need any more dresses!” He tried to make it a jest, but the gravity of the situation belied the attempt. She tried to smile, and he peered around, saying, “Does your mother still keep to her room?”

“Yes, Papa, she does not seem much better from this morning.”

He tutted and patted Henrietta before turning to go upstairs. There were many comings and goings throughout the afternoon as arrangements were made for the knackers to take the dead horse, repairs to be made to the new harness, and various other needs.

Henrietta, finally warmed through, sat by the front windows watching as people came and went from Radford House. It wasn't until a fine carriage pulled up to the front that she remembered the scheduled visit from Viscount Kittering.

She patted her hair and smoothed her dress as she stood and waited for the gentleman. She sent a message to her father and had just composed herself when her visitor was announced.

She curtsied and indicated one of the chairs. He sat, his rather long face and narrow-set eyes taking on a somewhat sinister effect from the play of shadows from the fire.

She lowered herself onto the settee and explained as he glanced around, "You find me unattended, this afternoon. My mother is ill, and my chaperone and I were involved in a carriage accident this morning. While we are both unhurt, she was in need of some rest."

"I can only imagine. After my surgery, I spent many days requiring rest. I hope she recovers quickly."

"Thank you."

A silence fell, and Henrietta did her best to appear blank, hoping that by doing so it would frighten him from declaring.

It did not.

"Miss Darrow, I am here at my mother's urging. For, though we are not well acquainted, I am well acquainted with you by reputation. Your grace, beauty, and talent are unmatched, and it is with joyful satisfaction that I offer myself to you as a future husband."

Her eyes widened, and she tried to withdraw the hand he had so zealously caught. He held tight to it, and finally she decided to give him an answer if only to be able to retrieve her hand.

"Sir, I thank you for the honor, but it is not within my power to accept, especially seeing as how we are so little acquainted."

"So..." He frowned at her uncertainly. "If we were better acquainted, you might find it possible to accept?"

She was completely taken aback. "No, sir, pray do not think me capable of accepting any entreaty. I have no thoughts of matrimony at present."

"Not at present, but perhaps in the near future...?"

The man was impossible! She pulled her hand back and finally succeeded in freeing it. "No, sir, I cannot accept you now or in the future. I thank you for the honor of your proposal, but I must refuse."

He looked at her askance, as though not believing her. As she continued to sit erect and with a rather severe expression, he finally stood and bowed to her. He shifted in his seat and seemed as though he wanted to say something, yet did not know what. Finally, he merely bowed again and left.

She collapsed on the couch and closed her eyes, wondering how the day could get any worse. Finally, she made her way upstairs to her room and sat by the window, watching the street and wondering what George was doing.

She sat there long after darkness began to fall over the house and the city came to life with light.

Chapter Eighteen

Lady Loughton was forced to cancel the following day's events as well. The carriage was not yet ready, even though a second pair of matching horses was available. Henrietta awoke the next morning feeling the full extent of her body's bruises from the day before. And, since Lady Loughton herself still had a bad throat, it was deemed best that they forgo that day's luncheon.

Lord Loughton opened the paper at breakfast and all but snarled to see mention of his carriage's involvement in a small paragraph on the fourth page.

"Well, my dear," he said to Henrietta, "I fear there will be many notes of concern and possible calls made today."

Sure enough, by late morning there had been several notes and one or two calls. As Lady Loughton still kept herself above stairs, it was up to Henrietta to meet them and to answer the notes. In between, she practiced the piano and wrote to Penelope and Eliza. Sometime in the afternoon, another note arrived, and she opened it, only to find it was from George. She noted the unsteady hand with which he had written it and carried it with her to the desk to write a reply.

My dear Mr. Strathom,

I am grateful to have received your note concerning the incident with our carriage. Let me assure you that I and Mrs. Daggett, the only occupants of our carriage, are well. It is with infinite regret that I will have missed seeing you last night, but I am sure you understand our absence. Despite the loss of a horse, we are relatively unscathed and will be returning to our social obligations within the next day or so.

With warmest regards,

Henrietta Darrow

She read it over and felt it lacking but did not know how to improve it. At least, she thought, her mother need not know of this slight breach in etiquette. She quickly addressed it and put it with the others to go to the post. Then she carried his note upstairs and slipped it into her drawer, where she had placed the handkerchief he had given her.

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Later that evening, George sat reading when the post was brought in. He had been uneasy since reading in the papers of Henrietta's accident. He knew that if there had been any serious injuries, the paper would have capitalized upon them, but still he needed to know that she was well.

He glanced over the letters, and one imposed itself most strongly on his awareness. He opened it, and his eyes went wide as he realized that Henrietta had written the note herself. Relief that she was well flooded through him and he sat back against the cushions of the couch.

He stood and went to the window. The rain had stopped, and he decided to go for a walk despite the darkening sky. His overcoat felt heavy and smelled of something herbal as he pulled it on. He remembered a hat and decided to take an umbrella just in case. Then, he stepped free of Lincoln House and into the early London evening.

The city was coming alive with light and he had to be careful of the splashing rainwater by the wheels of cabs and carriages and the hooves of horses.

He walked several blocks until he had come close to Radford House. There, he hid once again in the shadow of the tree that grew at the corner and watched as Henrietta sat at the piano, yet again. She did not sing this time, merely toyed with the keys, then stood and came to the window where she leaned against the glass and peered out. Someone came from behind her and she stood back to allow the servant to draw the curtains, cutting her off from his view.

He was satisfied. She lived and was well, no worse for her misadventure. He turned and began making his way back home. He was not alone in the evening hustle, and rain fell gently as some point, so he opened his umbrella and drew the lapels of his coat up. The wool fabric scratched at his cheeks as he hunkered down. Eventually, he reached home and divested himself of his coat and went upstairs to change for supper.

His mother was in the dining room before him and took him to task over going out. "What were you thinking, out in the rain like that?"

"I was thinking I wanted to get out of the house."

"You walked to Radford House, I am sure of it."

"Well, and if I did, what would it matter?"

"Nothing, except that you may have caught a cold, and we have an engagement tomorrow evening," she said, looking a little wary.

He frowned and picked up his napkin. "An engagement? Where?"

"Remy has invited us to his house for supper."

"I had wondered when he would invite us over," he said as the butler ladled soup.

"He is very busy, you know," Delia said rather defensively while she picked up her spoon.

"Oh, I understand. But he seems to make time for you," he said with a light tone of mischief in his voice.

“Ridiculous child! Such thoughts are not worth voicing.” But she wore a slight smile and was much more gracious than was her wont. And she was in a much lighter mood for the rest of the evening.

They arrived the next evening at the Vansittart house. Delia wore a deep burgundy gown edged with golden ribbons and the diamonds her late husband had given her upon their marriage. George felt rather shabby by comparison in his black coat and pants, and white waistcoat.

The house was a large Elizabethan manor house that had been refitted with modern conveniences. The furniture was new but had been designed in an older fashion, as though to emulate history and stability. It was still very tastefully done.

Remy welcomed them into his home, kissing Delia on both cheeks and shaking George’s hand. They went into a parlor for drinks and George noted that there were several other people present. Introductions were made and George was sorry that Jemima Saunders was not one of the party.

When he made mention of it, Remy brushed it off. “Oh, Jemima is caught up with her work and could not make it.”

While they were at supper, Remy looked at George. “I read some friends of yours were involved in a bad accident some days ago. I hope there were no serious injuries.”

“Who was that, pray?” asked the wife of one of the businessmen present.

“The Loughtons.”

The table erupted in exclamations and excited tones.

“Yes, I read about that!”

“Awful, they need to crack down on these speed fiends.”

“Was it as bad as the papers made it out to be?”

“Well, Miss Darrow and her chaperone were shaken, but unhurt,” George said.

“Why you still bother with the Loughtons, I don’t know,” Delia said.

“Why wouldn’t I? They are friends...”

“Friends who refuse to allow their daughter to marry you?!” she said into the dead silence that suddenly reigned.

George’s mouth opened in silent remonstrance, but Delia tossed her head and said only, “They are not worth our time. Lady Loughton and her superior ways. Her daughter is nearly as bad.”

Remy nodded and raised a glass. “I think we have all suffered at the hands of the titled gentry in some fashion or another. Don’t let it worry you, George, there are plenty of girls out there!”

There were nods all around, but George was mortified. He could not trust himself to speak because of his anger, and instead studied his plate and stabbed at the quail with his fork. Luckily, the tide of the conversation changed, and he was able to recover to some extent and have reasonably calm conversations with the guests on either side of him.

It was late when his mother was ready to leave and she transferred

herself from Remy's arm to his. He led her out to the carriage and helped her in, then followed her.

As soon as the door was shut, he could not hold back any longer. "How could you do that, Mother?" His jaw was tense from the effort of restraining himself.

"What? Oh, the bit about the Loughton girl. Well, whatever is the matter?" She brushed it off with a slight wave of one hand.

"It was embarrassing," he said tightly.

"Nonsense. It showed them what kind of people the Loughtons are." Despite her words, she looked at him with a hint of alarm.

"It showed them my personal business, which did not need to be discussed over dinner." His voice was even, but he could feel the vein in his temple throbbing.

She tried to smile and brush it off. "Oh, George, you are being too sensitive."

"Sensitive or not, I will thank you not to discuss my personal business with anyone."

She tilted her head to one side and affected to ignore him. Familiar with her moods by now, he leaned back and sighed.

"I don't know why you persist with that girl." Delia sniffed and tossed her head.

"Let it go, Mother," George said wearily.

"No, I will not. She is a lovely creature, I grant you, but she is not singular! There are other girls who can bring you beauty and fortune and who will appreciate..."

"The second son of a first baronet. I think not, Mother."

"You rate yourself too meanly. You are tall, handsome, and well-mannered. You also have a good heart, not that that is prized nearly as high as manners and appearance."

"I would rather not discuss this." There was an edge to his voice.

"Well, I would. Remy agrees with me."

"I will thank you not to discuss my marriage prospects with someone so wholly unconnected with me."

"Remy is about to be your stepfather..."

"But not yet."

He banged on the roof of the carriage and it came to a stop.

"What are you doing?"

George opened the door and stepped out. He leaned back in to say only, "Walking."

Then, he shut the door rather forcefully and thumped it again. The carriage pulled off, leaving him alone on the side of the street. He waited until it had moved beyond sight before starting off on foot. There was less traffic at that time of night, and he realized belatedly that it might not be the wisest place to go walking alone. He glanced around and saw he was on a bridge and

quickly got his bearings. Luckily, he was not that far from home and was in a well-lighted area.

He began walking, keeping an eye where his feet fell on the pavement to avoid droppings and pools of urine. A cab came by and slowed, but he waved it on. The cool air was bracing, and the exercise was stimulating after an evening of food and drink. And he could be alone with his thoughts of Henrietta.

His hands grew cold, despite his gloves, and he put them into the pockets of his overcoat. He was on the other side of the bridge now and he could step off the street away from the carriage that came rolling by. He was angry, angry that his feelings and the humiliation of his rejection were known to perfect strangers. He was angry at Henrietta's parents for being so set against him, and he was angry with Henrietta for refusing him.

He looked down at his fine clothes, paid for by his brother's beneficence. The home he was going to was the same—his brother's by right. He had nothing of his own, and he was ready for the independence William had promised. Ready for his mother to marry and move into her fiancé's large home. Ready for her to be ignorant of the personal details of his life.

Privacy and independence—God, what he wouldn't give for them.

He turned onto the street where Lincoln House stood. It was not overtly large, just an average house in town. White brick, three stories, servants' quarters taking up most of the third floor. Just an average London house, but he found himself quite attached to it. It had been his home most of his life, and he would be sorry if he ever had to see it go.

He sighed. His anger had melted away, leaving only weariness in its stead. Stepping up the stairs, he rang the bell and went in.

His mother was waiting.

"How dare you just walk out on me while we are talking! You could have been attacked on the streets like that!"

The anger came roaring back. "Do not seek to lecture me, Mother. I am a grown man, not your little boy!"

She blinked and reared backward as though struck. Her temper flared again, and she came toward him once more. "Don't you dare talk to me that way! You are still my son—"

"I am my own man. My life is my own and my business is MINE. And I will thank you to stay OUT of it." He thundered and she faltered. He stormed past her and up to his room before she had recovered from her shock.

The next morning, George went down to breakfast expecting a renewal of the previous evening's argument. Instead, he found his mother calmly reading her letters.

"Good morning, George," she said sweetly as he came into the dining room.

"Good morning, Mother," he said, possibly more forcefully than necessary.

"I will be out this morning—I have to visit the hat shop to have something made for that new pelisse of mine."

"Oh, well, good luck with that endeavor."

"I shall probably be out for much of the day as I am meeting Lady Strickham for tea."

"Enjoy," he said quietly in a detached sort of tone.

"Thank you, darling, I shall." She dabbed her lips delicately with a napkin and stood. "You have a lovely day." And then she was gone.

He watched her go with raised eyebrows and decided that perhaps he should have stood his ground with her long ago. He frowned then and considered. Perhaps it was time he took a sterner approach where Henrietta was concerned as well.

He called loudly for the butler who appeared suddenly in the entrance to the room. "Quickly, have the gig brought round."

"Yes, sir."

"No, wait. The carriage."

The butler's eyes widened but he nodded and withdrew, leaving George to straighten his cravat and grin rather formidably to himself.

Chapter Nineteen

Henrietta stepped from her carriage and adjusted her top hat. Mrs. Daggett followed, and both looked around for Miss Abernethy and her own chaperone. The groom brought Henrietta her horse and helped her to mount into the sidesaddle. She then spent several minutes adjusting her skirts.

“Miss Darrow!” called a breathless voice. “My apologies!”

Augusta’s horse jogged up and she ducked under a tree limb as they neared.

Henrietta turned her horse to greet her and smiled. “Nonsense! It is a lovely morning, is it not?”

Augusta adjusted her jacket and twitched a skirt. “Yes, but I can’t get situated today.”

“I know, my skirt does not want to lie properly, either.”

“I think we look well enough as it is, though.”

“We shall have to do! I am not getting off this horse only to climb back up!”

Henrietta led the way onto the green and Augusta followed. From the corner of her eye, she caught sight of George Strathom finishing his morning ride. He tipped his hat to them and rode past.

“I am glad to see him so well recovered,” said Henrietta.

“Yes! I heard about his accident. He seems well enough, now.” Augusta’s eyes followed him as she spoke.

Henrietta glanced down for a moment, then said overbrightly. “Well, and what engagements do you have this week?”

They compared their schedules, finding them very similar. Both would be at the same afternoon tea, a breakfast, and a ball to be given later in the week.

“Have you any serious contenders?” Augusta asked.

“None, so far. And you?” Henrietta smiled at her, silently begging forgiveness for the lie.

“My cousin has made some advances, but Mother would prefer me to encourage just about anyone else.”

“Your cousin...D’Courcy?”

“Yes.”

“And how do you feel about him?”

Augusta sighed. “I think he considers me an easy fortune. I was rather silly about him as a girl.”

“But not now?” Henrietta asked.

“Well, one grows up, doesn’t one?” Augusta said uncertainly.

Henrietta chuckled and twitched her horse’s head away from a convenient hedge. “Indeed. That is the goal, at any rate. I had thought your cousin lacked something along those lines.”

Augusta giggled, a gloved hand rising to her mouth. “Yes, you are correct about that! He is still the same impulsive and rather self-centered boy he ever was. That can be enchanting in a child but not so much in a grown man.”

Henrietta joined her in laughter. “No, indeed!”

They met another group of three young ladies and visited for a few minutes, watching the antics of several young men sidestepping their horses past them in a rather ostentatious manner. More than one girl rolled their eyes. The other three eventually moved on and Henrietta and Augusta urged their horses forward.

They had completed one circuit and were about to start on a second when an unfamiliar groom came running up. “I am looking for Miss Henrietta Darrow!”

Henrietta frowned with alarm and said, “That is me.”

“That is my cousin’s groom,” said Augusta.

“Mr. D’Courcy sent me to collect you. Your father has collapsed!”

Horror drove all caution to the wind as she instantly unhooked her leg from the pommel and slid down with help from the groom.

He took control of her horse and indicated a waiting carriage on the road just off the green. “Mr. D’Courcy sent his carriage to take you home.”

She picked up her skirt and ran, one hand holding her hat in place. There was no footman, so she assumed the carriage had been dispatched in too much of a hurry. She climbed in, noting belatedly that it seemed familiar, and slid onto the seat only to have the door shut securely behind her.

Her head snapped up and she frowned, only to see Cecil D’Courcy sitting on the opposite seat. “Oh, sir, please tell me how my father is!”

“Well, we shall be there soon, and you will see for yourself,” he said rather vaguely.

Henrietta nodded, then reached over to move the curtain aside so as to watch the road.

D’Courcy’s voice rang out harshly. “Leave it—I have a headache.”

Her hand withdrew and she sat still, worrying the fingers of her glove with one hand.

The ride seemed to go on forever. In fact, some sixth sense told her that they had truly been travelling for far too long and that they should have reached Radford House by that time.

“Pray, where are we going? The groom said you were taking me home.”

D’Courcy grinned, rather unpleasantly. “Well, that is true in a sense. I am taking you along a path to your new home, with me.”

“What?” Her heart skipped a beat.

“We are eloping.” A nasty grin lurked about his lips.

“Eloping...? But my father...?” She went pale.

“Is well, as far as I know,” he said matter-of-factly.

She reached over toward the door handle, but his long leg shot out and blocked her, pinning her to the seat.

“Don’t. This will only go as far as it needs to secure you.”

“Secure me?!” She went paler still.

He laughed. “Well, yes. Secure you and your delectable dowry. I must gain my fortune somehow, and this seems the best way.”

She stared in horror. “This will not succeed—I will never marry you.”

“You may think twice about that when you have no other choice.” His eyes slid over her figure rather lewdly.

“You cannot do this.” She crossed her arms in front of her instinctively.

“I just have. You were seen in a public place going willingly into my carriage. My own cousin was a witness.”

Henrietta blanched. The cousins were complicit? Augusta knew?

He smiled, then showed a small knife he held in one hand. “Just to make sure you don’t try anything stupid.” He switched seats then, one arm encircling her, his hand resting on her shoulder just above her breast. “The better to clamp down on your mouth if you make a sound,” he whispered in her ear.

They went on for what seemed like hours but was probably only long enough to get them to the outskirts of London. Every time the carriage slowed or came to a stop, he tensed as though ready for her to attempt to flee.

They finally pulled up and the carriage stopped. He held her tightly, the tip of the knife pierced her riding habit and pressed against her rib as he held her for all the world as though he was a lover. He stepped free of the carriage and pulled her after.

They were at a house in a rather shabby part of town. The outside of the house was a dingy gray, its light stone covered in soot and mildew, paint peeling from the door and its frame. It lay packed in a tight row of houses, all similar in their appearance and state of mild disrepair.

She was led forward and through the door that opened as they neared. A slatternly maid shut the door behind them and went off without looking once at Henrietta. Dilapidated furniture cluttered the front room and there was no fire. The air was chill and if the maid had not been present, Henrietta would have thought the place was uninhabited.

D’Courcy led her upstairs to a bedroom just off the main landing. Terror caused her legs to buckle and the knife dug into her ribs. The pain startled her, and she stood once more, shaking.

He shoved her forward through the door.

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The old Strathom carriage pulled up before Radford house. George sat for a moment, inhaling the slightly fusty scent of the interior. He drew in a deep breath, trying to build up his resolve. Then, he opened the door and stepped free, walking resolutely up to the door.

As the door opened, another carriage pulled up, stopping just behind his own. He turned to watch as Henrietta's chaperone struggled out of it and huffed her way to the door as well.

Once there, she swept in and demanded, "Where is Lord Loughton?"

The butler disappeared and then returned with Lord Loughton in tow.

"What is all this, Madam?"

"You are well? But I don't understand." She was shaking her head as an awful thought was beginning to take shape.

"Where is Henrietta?" Lord Loughton asked with a frown.

George echoed, "Yes, where is Henrietta?"

"She is not with you?" Mrs. Daggett's voice was rising now.

Lady Loughton appeared at the top of the stairs, handkerchief to her throat and still in her dressing gown. "Where is Henrietta?"

"That is what we are trying to determine," Lord Loughton said.

"Nay, she was collected at the park by a young man claiming that you were ill, and she was needed immediately at home." Mrs. Daggett's voice was shaking.

"What!" Lady Loughton exclaimed hoarsely.

The viscount's face turned red. "Vicious calumny!"

"Has Henrietta been kidnapped?" Lady Loughton's voice rose into a shrill wail.

Mrs. Daggett was shaking now. "It would appear so—by Cecil D'Courcy."

George blanched and stared. "Is it for certain?"

"The Abernethy girl saw her get into his carriage."

He ran a shaking hand down his face as Lady Loughton dissolved into hysterics and said, "Is the carriage still out front?" A tremulous affirmative was given, and Lord Loughton shouted, "My coat and hat! Strathom!"

"Sir?"

With a hand on his chest, Lord Loughton quickly explained. "We must trace her and recover her at all costs. Mr. Strathom—I recall how you were able to trace that wayward fiancée of your brother's. Please act with me now to save my Henrietta!"

George quickly gained control of himself. "Certainly, sir. May I suggest we talk to the Abernethy girl?"

"That is an excellent suggestion." He ran down the hall for a moment before returning with his pistol. He handed it to George saying, "My hand

shakes nowadays. You handle this?"

George nodded, then he and the viscount climbed aboard the Loughtons' carriage and it pulled away. The driver was pushing the large equipage forward with haste, despite the cabs trying to cut in and move through cracks in the traffic.

As they went, rocking slightly from the driver's commands, Lord Loughton turned to George and said, "Er...what was it you wanted when you came by?"

"Sir, perhaps now is not the time."

"It may be your only time. Speak, man!"

"I simply want to inform you that I do not plan to go away. I love your daughter, and I know she cares for me."

Lord Loughton turned red, then blanched. "Strathom, after today is done, I want you as far from my daughter as possible. For both your sakes. She is not for you."

George simply looked away. It was many, tense minutes later before they drew up in front of the Abernethys' home.

They were announced, and the butler at first intoned that Mr. Abernethy was not receiving.

Lord Loughton raised his voice and shouted, "It is an emergency, man, get your master!"

Mr. Abernethy appeared moments later and was obviously annoyed to have visitors at that time of day. "Well, well, what is all this about?"

"Cecil D'Courcy has abducted my daughter!" the viscount declared.

"What? Nonsense. He was just here this morning." Mr. Abernethy brushed off the assertion.

"Lord Loughton, you are well!" Augusta's voice echoed from the stairway. She was still in her riding habit. She frowned, then, and said with a note of fear in her voice, "But then, where is Henrietta?"

"That"—George said gently but firmly—"is what we are hoping you can tell us."

"Will someone please tell me what is going on?!" Mr. Abernethy all but shouted.

Quickly, Augusta did so. "It was Cecil, Papa. His carriage pulled up and his groom yelled to Henrietta that her father was ill and she was needed that moment. She didn't think, just handed me the reins to her horse and ran."

Mr. Abernethy's face grew first red, then pale. "Impossible," he sputtered. "Impossible, I tell you! He would not do such a thing. There must be some mistake!"

"So, it would appear he has gained control of Henrietta through deceit," George said.

"Or they cooked this up as a ruse to elope," Mr. Abernethy countered.

George reddened, then. "I can attest to the fact that Miss Darrow would never elope or do anything to disoblige her parents."

“Turned you down, did she!” Abernethy said, then sobered as the implication dawned on him. “Ah, hmmm.”

“Does D’Courcy have a house, or friends who might help him in this endeavor?” George demanded.

“Ford?” Augusta hazarded.

“Oscar Ford?” George asked, remembering the sandy-haired young man on the thin horse from a few months prior.

Mr. Abernethy was already speaking. “Yes, a ne’er-do-well my cousin hangs about with. Lives on the outskirts of London—shabby part of town.”

“Can you take us there?” Lord Loughton pressed.

“What? Me?” Mr. Abernethy appeared shocked at the thought.

George raised himself to his tallest. “Yes, sir, you.”

Augusta reached for his arm and chimed in, “Please, Father. Help them save Henrietta!”

“Fine, fine.” He half-cowered before George and tried to pull free of his daughter as he said gruffly, “Let us attempt to recover her, though this may all be a misunderstanding!”

The three men got into the Loughtons’ carriage after Abernethy gave instructions to the driver. The carriage jolted forward in haste almost before they were seated.

George stared out the window, terrified for Henrietta.

Chapter Twenty

Henrietta screamed as he shoved her, only to have D’Courcy slap her soundly, knocking her to the floor. She tried to stand, and he grasped her hair and raised her up.

“You will stop that! We are secure here, and such behavior is a mere annoyance.”

Her mouth opened in a silent scream of agony as her hair was snatched and pulled by his hand. He tried to tear her jacket off, but it was too well made and the buttons held.

He shook her head and said, “Undress.”

“No!” she gasped.

He flung her down on the bed and lifted her skirts. She kicked backward and caught him in a vulnerable spot. He released her with a howl and his knife went skittering across the floor. She scrambled for the door, but he caught her by the ankle, and she fell hard to the ground. He was on her then like a shot, groping about her skirts while trying to fend off her flailing fists.

She twisted beneath him and struggled against his grip as he held both her wrists in his hands. His legs went between hers and with a mighty shove, her skirt tore and her legs were spread beneath him. She twisted to one side and her hips shot out from under him and she clamped her legs together. He pressed himself down on her and made to kiss her, but she bit the cheek that came within reach.

He howled then and let go of her wrists in order to slap her, but she managed to shove him off of her and jumped to her feet. She was out and down the steps when she ran into a bleary-eyed young man. They tumbled together to the ground.

He shouted thickly, “Who the devil?” He tried to focus on her and then his gaze went to a spot beyond her even as she struggled to get up. “Cecil, what is this?”

She at once recognized Cecil’s friend, Oscar Ford.

D’Courcy reached down and picked her up from the floor yet again. “Just that little game we discussed, Ford.”

He laughed shortly. “Good on you—but get her out of here. I don’t want to be mixed up in this.”

“No worries. My cousin will cover for us.”

“I thought you weren’t going to bring her into this.”

“I didn’t, but she’s been sweet on me since we were kids. She won’t say anything.”

“I don’t like this, Cecil.”

“Too late now, Oscar. She’s here and here she’ll stay until her family begs me to marry her. Now”—he snatched her hair once again—“come along, darling.”

She struggled and looked into Oscar’s reddened eyes. “Please, help me! Please! My father will pay you a reward...”

“Your father will pay, all right. Twenty-five thousand and then some to encourage me to marry you after all your hijinks,” Cecil said.

“My...I have done nothing I need be ashamed of!” Henrietta replied hotly.

“Except”—he snatched her head close to his and whispered into her ear—“get into a carriage unchaperoned and go willingly to the house of an acquaintance with me.”

There was a sudden banging at the door, and it opened. The maid screamed and D’Courcy pulled Henrietta in front of him and ran backward toward the stairs. A large shadow shoved Ford to one side and reached D’Courcy. A hand clamped around the young man’s neck and began to squeeze. D’Courcy dropped his hold on Henrietta, who fell backward as his hands came up to pry his neck free.

George slammed the young man’s head against the wall and D’Courcy fell to the ground, senseless. Then he reached down and gently gathered Henrietta from where she had fallen. He set her aright, and she crossed her arms in front of her and dropped her head. Her hair was tumbling down her back, her jacket was hanging to one side and her skirt was still hitched partly up and lay open where it had torn. She started shaking, and George instantly drew her into his arms.

She melted against him at first, then after a moment she went rigid and he released her. She pushed past him and her father and made her way unsteadily through the open door to the carriage, where she climbed in and huddled in the corner.

George then turned on D’Courcy, who was beginning to come to his senses. He once more grabbed the young man and drew him up, flinging him against the wall. He pulled the pistol out and levied it at the scoundrel’s forehead. D’Courcy’s eyes came into focus and he began to cry and beg. George drew the hammer back.

“Don’t shoot!” Mr. Abernethy yelled.

George pressed the pistol harder against D’Courcy’s forehead.

“George!” Lord Loughton called in an authoritative voice.

George went still.

“Come now, son. Leave the scoundrel and don’t get yourself in trouble.

He and I will meet on the Field of Honor, I assure you.”

The seconds ticked by before George released the hammer and withdrew the pistol. He placed it in his pocket, swung his fist and connected soundly with D’Courcy’s face. Then he threw the senseless boy to the ground and followed Lord Loughton out of the house.

Henrietta had wrapped her arms around herself and sat staring out the window, not looking at her father as he entered the carriage. Her beautiful blue eyes were wide and blank. George tried to make eye contact, but she was completely withdrawn. She did not respond to him as he sat down. One hand twitched repeatedly at her skirts as she attempted to hold them closed. The other clutched the riding jacket closed across her chest. George felt his heart twist in his chest as he watched her fingers twitch perpetually about her clothes.

George sat across from Lord Loughton and his daughter. Abernethy had been left behind to deal with his kinsman. It was a slow procession in the early evening traffic as people struggled to make their way to their various homes after a long day at work or business.

He longed to hold Henrietta and wished he could wash away the horrible experience, but he felt helpless. He was only able to rejoice that she was safe and considering what they had thought not too long before, that was something to hold on to.

He was roused from his reverie by Lord Loughton who turned briefly toward him, seemingly uncomfortable, and then said, “Thank you, Mr. Strathom.”

George merely nodded.

They eventually pulled up before Radford House and Lord Loughton stepped down, with Henrietta after him. She still stood with her arms crossed in front of her and she glanced only once at George. What he saw haunted him—her eyes were wide and empty. The tightness in his throat stopped him from speaking before she looked away.

The viscount gave the directions to George’s home to the driver and they drove slowly back to Lincoln House. Once there, he climbed wearily down as the adrenaline drained from him, leaving him feeling sore and battered.

He climbed up the short steps and into the house, only to find some sort of gathering going on.

His mother sailed toward him with a glass in one hand. “George! Where have you been?”

He had forgotten his mother’s supper party. The supper tables were set up to one side of the card tables.

“Luckily, we had a ninth, so...” Her voice faded as she caught sight of his disheveled appearance. “What on earth has happened to you?”

George opened his mouth as though to speak, then merely shook his head and went upstairs, much to the disconcertment of those present. He shut the bedroom door behind him only to have a knock resound.

“George, tell me what is going on.”

“Not now, Mother.”

“George, I insist!”

He opened the door so suddenly she nearly fell in. “I said, not now, Mother.”

He shut the door again and began pulling clothes from drawers and the wardrobe in preparation for packing. After a moment, he heard her steps fade away down the hall and he sat on the edge of his bed and buried his face in his hands.

“Oh, Henrietta,” he whispered to himself.

The morning saw his bags arranged at the door as he waited for a servant to load them into the cab. He had not breakfasted below stairs and had not spoken to his mother since the evening before. She now came downstairs in her dressing gown.

At the sight of him with his baggage, she said, “Where are you off to?”

“Lytechley.”

“Whatever for?”

“I feel the need to visit the country.”

She made a sound very like that of a cat about to vomit and sat down with a sigh, waving a letter. “Oh, dear, I just had the most delicious gossip from Sheila Blakestone! She says someone made off with the Darrow girl—she actually got into his carriage and they ran off from Rotten Row in front of everyone!”

“I will thank you not to speak of Miss Darrow in those tones,” he all but growled.

Her eyes sharpened on him and she continued, “You were out rather late last night. Did you have something to do with her recovery? Is that what all this is about?”

“Leave it, Mother,” he said, his eyes closed.

“No! If you know something, then tell me!”

He swung on her. “This is not something one just banters about. A girl was horribly abused.”

She gasped. “Oh, they didn’t! Sheila told me the state she was found in—practically naked.”

“How does this Sheila come to know anything about it?”

“She is good friends with Mrs. Abernethy, whose husband was there, apparently.”

“As was I, and I can promise you she was fully clothed.”

“Well, there, at last you tell me something,” she said triumphantly.

“What?” He stared disbelievingly at her.

“Naturally, she told me you were there as well. Imagine how I felt hearing such a thing from someone like Sheila! My own son didn’t even tell me.”

He closed his eyes and then bent to pick up his bags. He saw the cab pull

up in the street and he carried his things out himself.

Chapter Twenty-One

Henrietta lay curled on her side and did not turn over when the maid crept in to place the breakfast tray or open the curtains. The bath was rolled out, having been left from her insistence to soak the night before. She had sent even Hatcher away so as to scrub herself repeatedly without witness. When the water went cold, she had dried and dressed herself and climbed into bed.

Now, she lay still, hoping the maid would soon go away.

She did, closing the door gently behind her. Every careful action spoke louder than words what she and every other inhabitant of Radford House knew—that the young mistress had been compromised!

Henrietta squeezed her eyes shut against the thought, then sat up, chin high. She had done nothing herself to deserve any censure. She reached over and pulled the tray close, and then ate her single egg and two pieces of toast. The toast stuck in her throat, but she swallowed it anyway. The tea was hot and went a long way to revive her spirit.

She took a deep breath and rose from her bed. She rang the bell and once Hatcher appeared, she helped her in a simple morning dress of lilac. It was a color she especially did not like even though it made her eyes shine very blue.

Once her hair was finished, she went downstairs, ignoring the looks the servants cast her way. She made her way to the main parlor, where both her parents sat. Their eyes grew large as they beheld her, but they said nothing.

She made her way to the piano and began to play very softly. Her fingers went awry once or twice, but her mother did not say anything.

The butler brought the post in and handed several letters to Lady Loughton on a salver.

She began going through them and frowned. "This is from the Bedenfels—we are going there tomorrow. I wonder what has happened." She opened the letter and went white. Henrietta stopped playing at the horrified look on her mother's face. "Of all the...curse those Abernethys!"

"What is it, Mama? What has happened?"

"We have been uninvited!" She tore open another letter, and the stricken look on her face told its own tale. She went through the stack. "Somehow your adventure has gotten round and the interpretation is a disgusting one."

"But not unreasonable, Mama," Henrietta said harshly.

“Nonsense!”

“No, Mama, not nonsense! It could very well have happened as horribly as everyone’s worst conjectures! For all you know, it did happen. I note that you have very carefully avoided asking me anything. Do you want to know?”

“I know you were fully clothed, and there was not time...”

“How much time does it take, Mama?”

“I say, what is the row about?” Reggie came in sleepy-eyed and in his dressing gown.

“When did you get here?”

“Last night—came in as a surprise but found the house in an uproar and just went to bed.”

“Well, you missed the cause of last night’s uproar.”

He seemed to catch some hint of the seriousness of the incident for he sobered and straightened. “What happened?”

Henrietta told him. “I was abducted yesterday. Father and Mr. Strathom managed to find me and rescue me.”

Reggie’s jaw dropped and he went red. “I will challenge the bas—”

“Reginald!” His father’s voice boomed. “I already did—the scoundrel did not show. No honor!”

Lady Loughton shrieked. “You challenged him? You could have been killed.”

“So I could, but I can still shoot and I doubt that scoundrel knows the right end of a rifle. My money was on me, and he obviously thought so too as he did not show.”

“Well, it’s all right, right? Hen’s back and unhurt...”

“Well, the story seems to have gotten round, and I am being dropped from the social lists quite rapidly, Reggie.” Henrietta played a little arpeggio and then another.

“That’s just dashed unfair!”

“But true, nonetheless,” she answered, her eyes closing.

“Why didn’t you accept Lord Charles! None of this would have happened.” Lady Loughton shook a fist full of letters and slapped them down on the tray.

“Mama, this isn’t Hen’s fault,” Reggie began.

“It is! She should have listened to her parents and accepted him. She would have finished the Season magnificently instead of...”

“What? Instead of what, Mama?” Henrietta demanded.

Lady Loughton’s eyes were red, and her voice was tight. “In disgrace!”

“Henrietta didn’t do anything!” Reggie all but shouted.

“She didn’t have to, son,” Lord Loughton said. “People’s minds have done enough.”

A strange sense of relief washed over Henrietta. *Is it over, then? The whole Season?*

“Well, what do we do now?” Lady Loughton cried.

“Go home,” Henrietta said. She reached over and closed the cover on the keys.

“What? After all the money and time spent? Go home without an engagement?” Her mother was in disbelief.

“Surely you don’t suggest she should marry D’Courcy?” Lord Loughton’s tone was shocked.

“What choice do we have?”

“I will not give in to that, that...this is just what he was hoping for,” he said forcefully.

“So your pride will force your daughter to be socially scarred for the rest of her days.”

“I will not marry Cecil. I want to go home. It is over for me here.”

Lady Loughton lifted a finger and said, “We may be able to salvage this.”

“No! I want to go home. Now. I want to go home to Lytchley and see my friends—people who love me no matter what others say about me.”

“There must be a way to stay and finish the Season.”

Lord Loughton rose and put a hand on his wife’s shoulder. “My dear, I think what Henrietta says makes sense. She should retire from the Season and go home. I would rather not expose her to any further conjecture.”

“Taking her home will look as though we are hiding her.”

“I can’t help what it will look like. Staying here with no social calendar will simply be ridiculous. My business in London is done. Henrietta’s Season is apparently over. We will go home.”

“Well, that’s rotten luck! I only just got here,” Reggie declared.

“I am so sorry, Reggie,” Henrietta said dryly.

“No, Hen, not to worry. I may just crash at the Pratts’ for a week or so.”

“Well then, let me call the staff together and write to the agent to cancel our lease.”

“I still say we can salvage this Season!” Lady Loughton said stubbornly, if mournfully.

“I say we won’t, and I won’t barter my pride in any effort to do so. Damn town rejects my girl, then to hell with them!”

Henrietta threw her arms around her father just then and after a shocked moment, his arms came up around her and he patted her awkwardly.

“That’s all right, my dear. You head off and get your things packed. We’ll go home.”

It took more than a single afternoon for the family to prepare to leave Radford House. Lord Loughton had to meet with the agents, servants had to be dealt with and trunks had to be packed and loaded.

However, the next morning saw the family ensconced in their carriage, minus Reggie who had moved on to stay with a friend. Henrietta was relieved and happy to sit in quiet, listening to her father’s gentle snore. Her mother sat in injured silence, still angry at the thought of the failed Season.

After two days of travel, they pulled up to Hadring Hall.

Henrietta thankfully climbed the stairs to her own room and collapsed on the bed, her nerves jangled from the constant motion of the carriage and the grating of wheels on gravel. Her trunks were soon brought up, and Hatcher set about unpacking them. Hatboxes remained stacked and dresses were lain about as she decided where to fit all the new clothing into the wardrobe and trunks in the room.

Henrietta decided to go for a walk on the grounds while Hatcher finished, in order to stay out of her way while she worked. She grabbed a pelisse and pulled on some gloves as she went out. Her bonnet was still affixed so she picked up a shawl against the slight breeze and stepped outside into the chilly sunshine.

There were little pockets of crocus amongst the shrubbery and she breathed in the clear country air. Her eyes closed, and she walked slowly, head tilted backward so the sun could shine on her face.

She crested the little hill and wove amongst the trees and the ruined remains of a tiny, ancient church. Nothing was left of it now except an arched doorway and a crumbling wall or two. She stepped through the doorway, walked the length of the broken wall and came out the other side. She heard hoofbeats and was startled by the appearance of a horse and rider.

It was George.

“Miss Darrow!” He stared incredulously.

“Mr. Strathom?”

She paled at the memories the sight of him brought. Her chin lifted a bit in defiance of the way he had last seen her. Their eyes met, and a little of the wall within her crumbled at his expression. Then, he turned away. She frowned at this, unable to fathom his thoughts.

His horse fidgeted a bit, and she said, “I never thanked you for your assistance.”

“Unnecessary. It was my honor.”

“And mine, it would seem.”

He looked at her then, and his face was inscrutable. White dents appeared suddenly on his temples, and an inscrutable mask settled over his face. She glanced down, hurt by the rejection she thought she read there.

The flower in her hands was shredded, and she said, “Well, if you will excuse me, I need to return home.”

“Of course. I apologize for intruding.” His horse pawed at the ground once or twice.

“Not at all.”

She looked at him once more and their eyes met. Then she turned and moved back toward the Hall, which stood just beyond the downward slope of the hill. She could feel him watching her, and it was many minutes before she heard the sound of hoofbeats racing away.

She understood. He could no longer look at her the same. She was now compromised, tainted in his eyes as well, and his rejection cut her deep. Tears

threatened, but never spilled. She had cried enough over the past few days.

The loss of her reputation, though, paled by far in comparison to the loss of George's friendship.

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He urged his horse onward, angry at himself for not saying more. What must she think? Well, he could see the sight of him was unwelcome. She must forever connect him with that moment of her worst nightmare come true. The way she had stiffened at his touch! He closed his eyes for a moment against the thought. The loss of her friendship—her openness and honesty—was more than he thought he could bear.

He slowed the horse to a walk and let the breeze blow past him. It had not occurred to him that the Loughtons would have left London already, and it could only mean one thing—that somehow word had gotten out and the Ton had closed ranks on Henrietta.

He spurred his horse onward in time to the surge of anger he felt at London's society. The dearest, sweetest, brightest young woman's future soiled because of a spoiled, self-absorbed, young man.

He was coming up to the very fence that had been his downfall, and wisely slowed the horse down and chose a better place to take the fence. This time it was smoothly done, and he cantered down the rise and across the road to the drive up to Tredwell Abbey.

Rivers was there to take the horse himself and seemed relieved that they were both in one piece. "Thank 'ee, Mr. George."

"Thank you, Rivers," George said as he dismounted.

He walked to the house and went in, only to see Eliza curled up in front of the fire in the main room. He had hardly seen his sister-in-law since he had arrived the previous evening. William sat in the corresponding chair and smiled at him as he stepped lightly toward him. He held a finger to his lips and rose silently to join his brother.

When they were a little way away, George said with concern, "Is she ill?"

"Just a bit disordered," William said, but there was a note of excitement in his voice.

George stopped in his tracks and looked back toward his sister-in-law. "That was rather fast."

William blushed, and said only, "Dr. Welles thinks it is very early, so not that quick, perhaps."

George grinned, truly happy for his brother and clapped him on the shoulder. "Congratulations, brother!"

William turned even more red, if that were possible. A sound rose behind them and they both turned to see Eliza standing there.

"I see you told him."

"Dearest, he figured it out on his own."

“Congratulations, sister!”

Her hand rested against her stomach and she appeared pale. “This is an awful way to begin.”

“So I have heard. But it will pass.”

She smiled. “Yes, indeed, it will.”

“I understand the Loughtons are back,” William said.

“I did not know they were planning to leave London,” George said.

“Henrietta wrote to me...she told me a little of what happened. She did say they were coming home early.” Eliza’s expression was one of sadness for her friend. “I shall have to call on her...”

“Just now? You aren’t well,” William said in real concern.

She inclined her head toward her husband. “I am well enough to visit a friend. Let me change and then I will call the carriage.”

“Best order the carriage now—it takes some time to get the horses ready.”

“Of course, I still forget.” She looked at him and smiled wanly.

He smiled and rang the bell, then gave directions for the carriage to be brought. Eliza made her way up the stairs and William watched her go.

George noted his expression and asked, “How is she adjusting?”

“Beautifully. She takes it all in stride. I was worried at first that she would want to continue cooking and sewing, but she is letting those things go with grace.”

“And the spinning wheel?”

“In the parlor. I know better than to say anything about that!”

George laughed. “She is a treasure!”

“I am glad you finally recognize that,” William said drily.

“Now, William. Remember the circumstances.”

“I do—and all of my own making,” he said ruefully. “Well, what say you to a bit of sport tomorrow?”

“Of course. I haven’t taken a gun out in ages.”

“Neither have I. Been cooped up a bit much this winter.”

“I’ve been dancing and eating. It will do me good to get outside.”

Eliza came downstairs, dressed in a new gown and pelisse with a lovely bonnet to match. William smiled and helped her into the carriage which had just come round to the front. He kissed her and closed the door securely.

“You really are happy, aren’t you?” George said wistfully as William returned to the house..

“Immensely.” He turned and clapped his brother on the back. “Come, I have some figures to discuss with you.”

They went inside to William’s study—a small alcove off the library. William had several stacks of papers and a case lying on the desk there. He sat and motioned George into a chair and brought forth a ledger.

“Here. From what I can gather, if we divide the investments like so, there should be enough income to keep Lincoln House, the Dowager’s carriage and

horses, and income to live on besides. Tredwell can run on income from the farms, and these investments. What say you?"

George read over the simple sheet that would grant him his independence. "William, it is generous. Are you sure?"

"With Mother getting married, the money that usually went to support her will revert to you and should allow us each ample to provide for back-up and emergencies. I think I have done the figures correctly—we will have Fothergill go over it all and draw up the papers to formalize it." He stood up and leaned over the desk, his eyes taking in all the papers there.

"And you are really going to do this?"

William looked up at his brother and said, "I am."

"Thank you, William. I hope I would have wished to do the same."

William stood and extended his hand.

After a moment, George reached out and grasped it. "I shall have to learn to manage finances, I suppose!"

"Yes, you shall. You've already managed Lincoln House, so that should be no different. You will just need to keep track of the money coming in, now, since it will be your responsibility."

George drew in a breath. "That is a heavy thought indeed."

William just grinned. "I thought we would wait until after Mother is married to take this to the lawyers."

George laughed shortly. "I never thought I would be so anxious for her to do so!"

"Tell me about this Remy Vansittart."

George did so, in warm and equable terms. William nodded and agreed that it was a good thing for his stepmother to have found someone who could settle her so well, though he, too, was surprised that she had found someone in trade. They sat companionably and talked for some time.

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Eliza leaned back against the seat in the carriage, now approaching Hadring Hall. She fought down the nausea that threatened with the rocking of the carriage and took in several deep, slow breaths. She closed her eyes for a moment but it was worse, and she was forced to open them. Luckily, the carriage was just pulling up to the front of the manor and came to a stop. She waited for the step to be lowered and the door to be opened, before moving to get out. Then, she climbed the short stairs to the doorway. She barely had time to ring the bell before the door was opened by the butler. She was led into the parlor and her card was taken in.

Within minutes, she heard slippers tapping against the marble floor and Henrietta was there. Tendrils of hair had escaped her hairpins and her cheeks bloomed from being outdoors. She hugged Eliza with abandon.

"Oh my dear, it is so good to see you! Come sit by the fire—Eliza, are you quite well?" She looked with concern at her friend's somewhat pale

complexion.

"I am well, just what is to be expected." She emphasized the last word.

After a moment, Henrietta's eyes grew large, and she hugged Eliza again. "Oh, my! Congratulations! And you came out to see me?"

"Of course! I am quite well. And I desperately wanted to see you after receiving your letter. Tell me, Hen, are you truly all right?"

Henrietta sat on the couch beside her and clasped her hands. "Oh, it was a nightmare." She peered meaningfully at Eliza and added, "But not as horrible as it could have been."

Eliza touched the bruise on Henrietta's temple.

"Yes, he was rather brutish. But luckily, George and Father found me in time."

"George."

"Yes." Henrietta looked down.

Eliza reached over and grasped her friend's hands and Henrietta met her eyes and tried to smile.

"And now you are home," Eliza said gently.

"Yes. The culprit was a relative of a friend of mine, and her family must have gotten the story around. I was no longer welcome in London society."

Eliza's face was a mask of refined fury. "Of all the—"

"Eliza! It is quite all right. Almost a relief. I had grown so tired of the whole thing."

"But for you to endure censure of any form—"

"—is but our lot in life. He is unscathed though a vicious scoundrel and a coward. And I must come home."

Eliza squeezed her hands. "Well, we are happy to have you back!"

Henrietta's eyes dropped. "Well, some of you are."

"What do you mean?"

"Mr. George Strathom is likely not so happy about it."

"I think you are wrong there."

Henrietta merely shook her head and Eliza let it go for the moment.

"So, when are we to expect Sir William's newest blessing?"

Eliza laughed and leaned back against the couch to stare into the fire. "Oh, La! It seems ever so long, especially feeling like this. January? A winter baby."

"The sickness will go away, shan't it?"

"So I've been told. Just now, it feels as though it will never end. Now, tell me what you think of my dress! I did not make this or the pelisse."

They talked clothes for a while, then shared a lovely tea brought in by a maid. Henrietta took her upstairs to show her some of the dresses she had, especially those made by Jemima Saunders. Eliza agreed the woman was a talented dressmaker.

She twitched a bodice inside out and pointed, "But you see this seam, here? That is excessively difficult to do and yet she has made it seem

effortless. She is better than me, certainly!"

Henrietta laughed at her friend's seriousness. It would never have occurred to her to look at the seams of a dress to determine a seamstress' skill.

After a while, it was time for Eliza to go, and they kissed each other's cheeks.

"Come visit me when you are ready," Eliza said and Henrietta nodded, smiling.

Then Eliza stepped back into her carriage and was whisked off down the drive.

Henrietta watched her go, the momentary lift in her spirits falling as the carriage pulled farther away, and then turned the corner and disappeared from view. Slowly, she went back inside and made her way to her room to dress for supper. She decided to wear the Jemima Saunders dress and was downstairs in plenty of time.

Supper was a quiet affair. Her mother maintained an injured silence and her father was preoccupied with affairs of the estate. Henrietta was thinking of Eliza and her baby and wondering if she would ever be in such a position, and if she even wanted to be. She sighed silently and laid her fork down.

"The venison is a little tough this evening," her mother said.

"I did not find it so," her father said.

"I saw that *Lady* Strathom"—Lady Loughton laid extra emphasis on the title—"called today."

"She did. I was so happy to see her."

"She had better have stayed home. Calling to crow over our misfortune."

"She did nothing of the sort! She was kindness itself and came to tell me she is expecting."

Lady Loughton made an unladylike noise.

Lord Loughton looked up with an annoyed expression. "My dear, I really need to ask you to cease with your unveiled dislike of Lady Strathom. She has done nothing to deserve it and is an excellent and very particular friend to our daughter. And, at this time, we need all the friends we can muster."

His wife picked up her glass with a shaking hand and drank from it, then set it down. Her eyes were glittering in the candlelight.

Henrietta stood and said, "May I be excused, Papa?"

"Yes, my dear."

As she left, she could hear her mother's sharp voice attacking her father. She sighed and ran the rest of the way to her room.

Chapter Twenty-Two

A letter came for George the next morning. He noted it was from his mother and read the few lines it contained.

His eyebrows rose rather high on his forehead and he said to William and Eliza who were seated at the breakfast table, "Mother and Vansittart have set a date."

"When is it to be?" Eliza asked.

"Saturday next!"

"What? That is soon!" William exclaimed.

"Indeed. I shall have to go up." He looked up at his brother. "Would you care to join me?"

"I will have to check, but yes I would. We can deal with business while I am in town. Dearest?"

"You go. I will stay here. I am sure Lady Strathom will not mind if I am not there." George bit his lip but did not answer, and William just looked grim. "Besides, it would not be a pleasant trip in my condition."

The trip up to London was duly planned and executed the following week. Both men arrived at Lincoln House and got settled in. Lady Strathom was not at home, and the butler did not know where she was.

George frowned as he looked around the house. "She could have left a note."

"She is a grown lady," William reminded him.

"Yes, but a lady nonetheless. I hope she isn't behaving indecorously."

"Mother? Indecorous?" William replied in disbelief. "Perhaps she did not recall we were coming in today."

"No...look!" George held up a letter from a pile. "It is my letter telling her we would be in."

William's brow creased. "Perhaps she has been staying at a friend's?"

"Could she be with Vansittart?" George asked.

"Since Monday?"

Both men stared at each other uncertainly.

"Well..." George said. "As you said, she is a grown lady."

They decided to get supper at a nearby pub that evening, and it was late by the time they made their way home and went to their separate rooms.

A noise awoke George in the night, and he sat up, listening intently. He heard it again—a tinkling sound from the first floor. He got up as silently as possible and retrieved his small pistol. Edging out into the hall, he listened, but heard only some breathing and heavy movement from below.

He crept down the stairs and around the corner into the parlor. A single candle flame was lighted.

“Who’s there!” he demanded.

The candle flickered as the intruder spun around and held up his hands. “Please, I can explain.”

The voice was familiar, and George frowned and stared at the sight before him.

Just then, his mother came downstairs in her nightdress and shrieked, “George, stop! Don’t shoot!”

Remy was standing in smallclothes and a shirt hanging loose. He held a decanter in one hand and a candle in the other. Delia ran up and stood in front of him, still shrieking at George. George uncocked the pistol and dropped his hand to his side. He wiped a hand across his forehead.

“When did you get back?” Delia asked shrilly.

“William and I got in this afternoon.”

“William?”

“Yes?” William called from behind George.

His hair was ruffled, and he was also in a nightshirt, though he was pulling a dressing gown closed in front of him.

“You are both here?! Why didn’t you write you were coming?”

“I did—I said we would be attending the wedding.”

“Delia, it’s all right,” Remy said, chuckling.

“No, it isn’t.” Her voice was shaking. She crossed her arms in front of her and Remy placed his hands on her shoulders. “It is not all right.”

“We are all adults here. I’m sure the boys understand.”

George was struggling not to laugh, and William averted his face. He was the first to break the silence that followed.

“Good night!” he said and went up the stairs.

George followed with a wave to his mother and her fiancé.

Breakfast was somewhat awkward the next morning, with everyone trying to pretend nothing had happened the evening before. The wedding was set for the following day, and Remy excused himself early to go make preparations. Delia was equally busy. Whether from necessity or from the desire to avoid her son and stepson was uncertain, but neither saw much of her that day.

William left early to go see the lawyers and returned late in the afternoon.

“They are drawing up the paperwork. He hopes to have it all ready early next week for us to sign.”

“As simple as that?” George was incredulous.

“Well, yes. I had to listen to many hours of caution about splitting estates, etc. But ultimately, we sign, and it is done.”

“What is done?”

Both men turned to see Delia standing there.

George straightened and glanced at William, who nodded. George took a breath and then said to his mother, “William is signing over Lincoln House and some of Father’s investments to me.”

Delia stared at first one, then the other. “But that...is not possible.”

William smiled crookedly. “It is possible, and is nearly done. George will have his independence.”

Delia’s lip trembled, and her eyes glittered. She reached behind her for the chair and sat down, then hunted for her handkerchief.

George quickly gave her his. “Mother, what is wrong? Surely you don’t disapprove?” he said gently.

“Of course not! It was my one concern in marrying that you would lose your home and William would sell everything to support Tredwell.”

“Surely you did not think I would leave my brother homeless?” William’s face expressed some hurt at the thought.

“No, but I thought he might be relegated to a small set of rooms somewhere, perhaps.” She sniffled, dabbing her eyes.

“I’m sorry you don’t think better of me,” William said softly.

“I am sorry, William, but most men are quite selfish in money matters. And it has worried me that I would leave my poor boy alone.”

George patted her shoulder. “I am not alone, Mother. I have an excellent brother and sister, and you. And soon, Remy as well.”

She reached for his hand and nodded. “Well, I must go fix this wreck of a face.” She went to leave, then paused and came back. She stood in front of William, then reached up on her toes to kiss him on the cheek and left him staring after her with a startled expression.

The wedding was simple. The couple exchanged their vows and then the small company joined them at the Vansittart house for a wedding breakfast. Delia was gracious with joy, and George was able to introduce William to Remy’s sons. William was happy to see that his stepmother would be supported in at least as high a style as she was accustomed.

Within a few days, the lawyer arrived at Lincoln House with a box of documents that he carefully laid out on the table.

He looked at William, and said, “You must understand this is against my advice. Estates are passed from father to eldest son intact for a reason. You have set yourself back some twenty years with this endeavor.”

“It seems well worth it if my brother can now buy a pair of shoes without asking for permission.”

“The degree of independence is much greater than that.”

However, done with his precautions, he handed the papers around to be signed, and after a long, tedious hour, it was done. Then, George was lectured

on interest and deposits and all manner of financial obligations.

When Fothergill finally left, George turned to his brother with a rather overwhelmed expression. "I am starting to wonder if you did me any favors, here!"

William clapped him on the back and laughed. "Double-edged sword!" He glanced at the time and said, "I say, George, do you think your man could take me to the Post station in the morning? I would like to go home, I think."

George grinned. "Well, I shall endeavor to ensure the carriage is available for you. Perhaps you can even take it as far as Dildford before catching the Post."

William smiled. "That would be excellent." He stretched, cramped from sitting and listening to the lawyer. "Well, I am going shopping to find a present for Eliza."

"Do you need the carriage?"

"No, I shall take a cab."

He left then and went out, leaving George to peruse his house for the very first time. George went from room to room, finally stopping in the parlor where the old pianoforte stood. In his mind, he saw Henrietta seated there, playing softly. He found himself smiling, but it faded as he came back to reality.

Perhaps, he thought, he could make it happen.

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It was an unseasonably warm spring day, and Henrietta sat beside the large oak tree on the bench that encircled it. Her sketch board was propped on the easel in front of her, watercolors lying ready beside her. In the paddock in front of her was a mare and her week-old foal, the object of her study.

He was a feisty little thing, tiring of his mother's complacency and running around her, then stopping to stare with sudden intensity at some random object. Henrietta had sketched in a stance and caught the various parts as quickly as she could when he came to a standstill, which was not often and then only for a few seconds. He was a rich dark nutmeg color, and she was hoping to capture its glossy nature with the watercolors. But first, she had to get the form sketched in.

She looked up to see Penelope making her way across the field toward her. She waved happily and set her pen down, then reached over and cleared some of her colors aside to make room for her friend.

Penelope was dressed for travel in a sage green pelisse and a straw bonnet with matching green bows and cream-colored ribbons. Her light blue eyes appeared even more blue against the green.

Seeing her thus, Henrietta recollected that she was on her way to London.

"Are you off, then?"

"Yes, almost this moment. I begged to stop and see you for a few minutes first. Mrs. Ainsworth is waiting up at the house, having some tea. She

is quite happy.”

“Mama will take good care of her.” Henrietta’s smile faded somewhat as she mentioned her mother.

Penelope sat beside her and reached for her hands. “How are you? I have hardly seen you since you got back.”

Henrietta sighed. “I feel as though I am in prison. I am not allowed to take Marches out for fear I will run straight to Tredwell Abbey.”

“Why would that be so terrible?” Penelope frowned.

“Mother disapproves of Eliza and the Strathoms.”

“Perhaps, Mr. George Strathom most of all?” Penelope’s head tilted to one side.

Henrietta turned away slightly. “Yes, him most of all.” But she shook off her gloom and said, “So, you are off to London?”

“Yes, Papa wants me there. We will go to Vauxhall as we always do, as soon as it warms enough!”

“It sounds most pleasant.” They saw a servant coming toward them and Penelope rose. Henrietta stood with her and they embraced. “Beware of strange carriages!” she said with mock severity.

“I will.” Then Penelope hugged her again and went to meet the servant.

Henrietta watched her go, then turned back to her drawing. The colt had lain down, tired out from its antics. He was now stretched out in the grass, its little hooves twitching in a dream. She sighed and began packing up her things. Perhaps, she thought, her mother would reconsider allowing her to take the pony trap out.

She walked slowly up to the house and set her things down in the entryway. She glanced in the parlor, but it was empty, so she went looking for her mother in the library. She found her there, engrossed in her letters.

Henrietta waited for her to become aware of her presence before speaking. “Mama, may I please take the pony trap out?”

Lady Loughton’s mouth compressed into a thin line. “Why would you want to do that?”

“Just to get out. Maybe ride up and down the Stanton Road. I promise to stay close by.”

“I am not ready to allow that just yet. Give me some time. It was a shock for me as well, you understand.”

She turned to look at her daughter and Henrietta was horrified at how haggard she appeared. She was overcome, suddenly, with pity for her mother despite her anger.

“I understand, Mama. I will wait.”

“Thank you, my dear,” she said before turning back to her letters.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Clouds covered the sky, blanketing the countryside with a cold, damp air like a challenge from vanquished winter. The carriage pulled up to the steps of Hadring Hall and Eliza got out, hugging her shawl around her as she stepped up to the door. It was opened and she was ushered in, her card taken upstairs even as she was seated in the parlor. She stepped closer to the fire and held her hands out to it, chilled already from the short trip from Tredwell.

Henrietta called for Hatcher to come help her finish dressing. She picked one of her plainer gowns, a cotton day dress that she had not taken to London with her. It felt good to be in something that reminded her only of home and Lytchley, and the sleeves were long enough to keep her arms warm in the unseasonably chilly air.

She stepped lightly down the stairs to the parlor where she hugged her friend and sat her near the fire.

It had been many weeks since Henrietta had left London, and summer was nearly upon them, save for the cold air that had overtaken them. Eliza looked well, her sickness nearly gone now, and Henrietta called for tea to be brought in to them.

Eliza reached into her large reticule and pulled out a sock that she was knitting, handling several needles at once in a way that was dizzying to Henrietta.

“You still knit your own stockings?”

She laughed. “Well, yes. Some things are difficult to let go of, and I like the way my handknit stockings fit better than store-bought ones.”

“It must be wonderful to have such useful skills. All I can do is sketch and play piano.”

“And sing. Mustn’t forget that!” Eliza said with a smile.

“Well, a little. But none of it does any good.”

“All of it lifts the spirits and helps people think of lovely things. I think that is very useful, indeed.” Eliza’s frank, honest eyes looked at Henrietta with sincerity. “I would love to have one such lovely ability.”

“No one who knows you would think anything wanting, Eliza. You are valued wherever you go. Even George adores you!”

Eliza laughed. “Yes, he has come quite a ways!”

She made a grimace, and Henrietta frowned in concern.

“Are you all right?”

Eliza grimaced, then her forehead smoothed, and she said, “I think so... just an unpleasant...OH!” She bent forward and stood, just as the back of her skirt turned bright red in a spreading streak.

Henrietta screamed for help as she rushed forward to catch Eliza, who was in the process of pitching forward.

“What is all this? Henrietta!” Lady Loughton bustled into the parlor and looked uncomprehendingly at the scene in front of her. “Lady Strathom?” she said in real concern, then caught sight of the blood.

“Mama! Send for Dr. Welles and for Sir William. Hurry!”

Eliza had gone dangerously pale and slipped sideways in a faint. Henrietta held her up in her arms, even as Eliza’s skirt went darker red with blood.

She shouted to the servants, “Help me get her to the guest bedroom!”

A blanket was brought and wrapped carefully around her to keep her warm. Henrietta and two servants lifted her and carried her to one of the guest rooms where her dress was removed.

Eliza awoke in the midst of being undressed and cried out, “What is happening? Hen?”

Henrietta grabbed her hand and said, “Lie still, Eliza dearest. The doctor is coming.”

Eliza caught sight of the bloody dress being lifted away by one of the maids and her mouth opened in horror. “No! Not the baby...” Then her eyes rolled back, and she fell backward against the bed.

Lady Loughton came in and took command of the situation, much to Henrietta’s relief.

“Go get some hot water and towels. As soon as Dr. Welles gets here, bring him to this room. Get one of Miss Darrow’s nightdresses and bring it here. Let us know when Sir William arrives, but keep him downstairs.” Then she turned to Eliza and said to Henrietta, “Go get my smelling salts.”

Henrietta ran out of the room and returned within a few minutes, carrying the vial of salts. Lady Loughton waved them under Eliza’s nose and she snorted lightly and came awake.

She looked up at the two women and began to cry. “Please...please, God, not my baby...”

“Shhh...Lady Strathom.” Lady Loughton brushed the hair back from her forehead. “The doctor will be here soon and he will know what to do.”

“William...”

“Has been sent for. Lie still now, conserve your strength.”

Eliza took in a shuddering breath and nodded, tears spilling over and tracing their way down her cheeks.

There was a commotion in the hallway and Dr. Welles came in, carrying his bag. He examined her and determined that she was still bleeding despite

the efforts to clean her by the maid and Lady Loughton. He worked for some time, giving orders to Lady Loughton, who did exactly as she was told.

Henrietta stood by, watching as her friend went even more pale with loss of blood and slipped back to unconsciousness. She lifted shaking hands to wipe tears from her cheeks and pressed herself against the wall to stay out of the way of the servants coming and going.

Another commotion in the hallway sounded and William burst in. "Eliza?" he almost howled in fear.

"Get him out of here," Dr. Welles said in a firm voice.

"My wife!" He insisted, reaching for her.

Lady Loughton's hands went on his chest and she pushed him gently, but firmly, back from the bed. "Sir William, please. We are doing our best!"

"I can't leave her," he said in an agonized whisper.

Henrietta pushed away from the wall then and went over to take his arm. "Come, Sir William, and wait with me. Mama and Dr. Welles have her now."

William resisted only for a moment before allowing her to lead him to the next room. He stood by the fire, staring blankly into the flames. Henrietta sat, burying her face in her hands.

It seemed a long time before Lady Loughton came to them. Her dress was stained with Eliza's blood, but she was calm as she said, "We managed to stop the bleeding, and she is resting now. She is asking for you, Sir William."

He brushed past her and went to his wife's side.

Lady Loughton wiped at her forehead, and her daughter came up and touched her on the arm. "Thank you, Mama, for helping her."

Lady Loughton's voice shook as she answered, "It is a hard thing to lose a child. I lost two in much the same way. One never quite forgets."

Henrietta hugged her mother gently, but they broke apart quickly and she went to see how her friend was doing.

William was kneeling beside the bed, one hand cradling Eliza's head and the other gripping her hands. Their foreheads touched for a moment in shared grief and then Eliza's eyes closed. William looked toward the doctor in panic.

The gentleman reached for Eliza's wrist, paused for a moment, then nodded. "She has lost a lot of blood and will likely slip in and out of unconsciousness. She must be kept very quiet and given plenty to drink."

"Can I take her home?"

Dr. Welles shook his head. "No. She must not be moved!"

Lady Loughton said from behind Henrietta, "Sir William, she will receive the best care, I assure you."

"Will she live?" This was said in an agonized whisper to the doctor.

"As long as she doesn't start to bleed again, she should recover."

William blanched at the thought that she was not completely out of danger, but he nodded. "Miss Darrow, would you be so kind as to write to my brother and inform him, please?"

Taken aback, Henrietta glanced at her mother, who closed her eyes but

nodded. "Of course, Sir William. Right away. Shall I ask him to come?"

William could only nod, and Henrietta slipped away to her mother's writing desk in the library and quickly wrote the note and carried it to the butler to have it posted. Then she returned to the room where her mother still stood watch at the door.

She did not look at her daughter as Henrietta came up, but rested a hand on her shoulder and turned away saying, "Have me called if her condition changes."

"Yes, Mama. Thank you."

Lady Loughton merely nodded and left.

Eliza slipped in and out of consciousness for much of the night but was able to keep some water down and did not begin bleeding again. By the time Dr. Welles came the next morning, she was still pale but awake and able to talk. She burst into tears when he confirmed what everyone knew—that her baby was gone.

William stayed beside her all day, leaving only when his steward, Rivers, came to consult with him about an estate matter. William dealt with it quickly in the hall, then returned to his wife.

At that point, Eliza said, "My dear, I am well now. You can go take care of the estate."

"I can't leave you."

"Yes"—she said, and reached out to lay a hand upon his arm—"you can. Please, William. Henrietta will take good care of me. You need to rest."

He bowed his head, but he knew she was right. He kissed her gently and left instructions to be called the instant anything changed. Then he left with a backward glance at his wife, who smiled wanly at him.

Once he was gone, she shut her eyes for a moment. "I am so lucky to have the love of a man such as he."

Henrietta concurred, and thought about what it would be like to live with such a love. Somehow, she could not imagine that her father had showed such concern for her mother when she had experienced the same situation. But then, theirs had never been a marriage of love, but rather one of convenience and fortune.

The next morning brought a letter addressed to her from George. It was short, merely indicating that he was on his way and to give Eliza his love, as well as gratitude that she had written to him for William. She fingered the edge of the letter and traced his signature, then carried it upstairs to her room where she placed it in a drawer by her bedside with her other treasures.

By the next day he had arrived, and Eliza was sitting up beside the fire and able to eat. He came in, glanced at William who sat with her and fell on his knees in front of Eliza and collected her into his arms.

"Eliza!" She hugged him back and cried a little. He wiped her tears with his thumb and said only, "Thank God you are all right!"

He stood then and shook hands with his brother, who gripped his hand

hard. "George," was all he said, but it communicated everything.

Henrietta's eyes went from one brother to the other, then she slipped out of the room as they conversed. She caught George's eye as she did so and managed to meet his gaze before stepping out.

It seemed in one instance as though they were friends again, and then memory would intrude and drive them apart. She retreated to her room, deciding to wait until George left before returning, thus giving them some time together while avoiding him.

It was not to be, however, for her father invited George and William to stay for supper. He was seated as far from her as humanly possible, and Henrietta kept her gaze trained on her plate.

"I must thank you again for your patience with all of us during this time," William said to Lord Loughton.

The gentleman brushed it aside with one wave of his hand. "Nonsense. All in a day's work amongst friends. Glad your wife is better, by Jove."

"Yes, I think we all feel relief at Lady Strathom's recovery," Lady Loughton said.

"I believe the doctor said he would come tomorrow to see if she was ready to go home," William said.

"No rush. Of course, I'm sure she will be happy to be settled at home."

There was silence as they ate.

Lady Loughton's ramrod back bent slightly as she said, "And I understand your mother is married now."

George swallowed and nodded. "Indeed. A man in cotton. It was a bit of a shock, but it seems to be an excellent match for her."

"I am glad for her. I imagine life gets lonely as a widow."

"She bore it well, but I think it had begun to prey upon her."

Lady Loughton glanced over at Henrietta and went silent.

Lord Loughton smiled at George and asked, "And you, sir, are you recovered from your accident?"

"Yes, indeed. A headache, now and then, is all to remind me of that night."

"There is no fear, I understand, that there is still some damage...?"

"No, sir, none. All is healed well," George said a little confusedly, but Lord Loughton seemed content with the answer.

Henrietta's stomach was clenched, and she sighed to herself. Her mother's eagle eye was watching her plate, and she was unable to hide the fact that she was eating very little. By the tight lines around her mother's eyes and mouth, she knew she would be getting a lecture later.

She set her fork down and leaned back. Looking at Lord Loughton she said, "Father, may I be excused?"

Startled, Lord Loughton paused in the middle of a story he was about to relate and stammered, "Yes, yes of course, my dear."

Henrietta rose and swept gracefully from the room, her mother's eyes

wide and boring through her as she went. She went through the hall and climbed the stairs to Eliza's room. She found her sitting up in bed, nibbling from a tray in her lap.

Henrietta smiled. "You look quite cozy."

Eliza smiled. "I feel quite cozy. I understand my husband and his brother are dining below."

"Indeed, they are. I begged to be excused."

Suddenly, Henrietta's eyes glittered in the firelight and Eliza reached out a hand to her. Henrietta rushed to her side and buried her face in her friend's shoulder.

Eliza let her cry, draping her arms around her and holding her until her sobs subsided. When Henrietta had gone quiet, she said, "Is it George?"

Henrietta nodded against her and Eliza said, "I know he loves you. I wasn't sure about your feelings. You never said much in your letters."

"I can't. My parents..."

Eliza's arms tightened around her. "I never had that burden. Uncle is incapable of seeing beyond my happiness."

Henrietta sat up and wiped a hand over her eyes. "Well, my parents don't see things quite like that."

"No, I imagine not. Still, if they knew how unhappy you were..."

"My happiness means unhappiness for them. Their happiness is unhappiness for me. So."

"So."

A soft cough alerted them of Sir William's arrival. Henrietta stood and made her hasty goodbyes before slipping from the room and returning to her own. There, she sat on the window seat looking out. Below, on the gravel drive, she could see William's carriage waiting. As she watched, George stepped down from the porticoed landing and paused just before climbing in to raise his gaze to her window.

She sat as still as stone. Then, her hand raised, and she laid it upon the cool glass. After a moment, he raised his hand as well. Their eyes met, and he turned to enter the carriage. Only a few minutes passed before William followed and the carriage moved down the driveway to the main road. Her eyes followed it and continued to stare at the point where it disappeared.

A couple of days later, Eliza was escorted home. Henrietta rode in the carriage with her so that she could help her get changed since she did not have a maid as of yet.

"I guess I am going to have to give in and find someone," Eliza said.

"I have a maid who might suit," Henrietta said. "She has filled in for Hatcher when I have needed a maid."

Eliza sighed. "I am sure she would be fine." She smiled at Henrietta. "Go ahead and send her on and I will give it a try. William will be happy. He hates doing up my corset!"

Both girls laughed at that, and the carriage pulled up to the door of

Tredwell Abbey. Eliza was helped gently down by her husband, with his brother on the other side to help escort her up the stairs. All the household had collected and stood to welcome her home, and she was shy with gratitude by the time she reached her room.

Once there, Henrietta helped her undress and slip back into a nightdress and dressing gown. She found some warm handknitted socks and slipped them onto her friend's feet, then helped her into the large master bed.

Eliza sank back against the pillows, exhausted by the short trip. Tea was brought in and the two girls drank and nibbled on biscuits. William and George came in, and Henrietta kissed Eliza then stood and left her alone with her husband.

George followed her out into the hallway and said, "Well, what now? I mean, about Eliza."

Henrietta considered. "I need to return home. I have a maid that I think would serve her well and I am going to send her over. Perhaps you could help William as far as getting her settled into her duties."

"I think that would be a job for Mrs. Haddley," George said.

"Yes, of course. Perhaps you could speak to her. I can take the carriage home and have her sent back in it." She managed to look him in the face and saw only uncertainty there.

"Are you sure your maid will want that?" He frowned.

"I expect so. It will be a step up for her but, naturally, it will be her choice. Let me go home and see if Minnie is agreeable."

She tried to smile at him but failed. His eyes bore into hers and she turned away in uncertainty.

She went out, then, and down the stairs to where the carriage still waited and gave instructions to the driver. Once back at Hadring Hall, she spoke to her mother about Minnie, and then called the housekeeper and Minnie to explain. The housekeeper was reluctant to lose a maid, but Minnie was very willing. She gathered her things and was helped into the carriage to be taken back to Tredwell Abbey.

Henrietta sat down by the fire in the parlor. Exhaustion swept over her and she took in a deep breath and closed her eyes. Just a few days earlier, her and Eliza had been sitting in that very spot.

Her throat closed off as she realized how close her friend had come to death, and how quickly animosities had been dispelled in the face of such an awful situation.

Perhaps, she thought, George would forgive her one day...

Chapter Twenty-Five

“Henrietta?”

“Yes, Papa?”

“I have a note here from Sir William, asking to borrow a horse and sidesaddle for his wife to take a lesson on. Have we a horse that would suffice?”

“Old Shan would be perfect, and I have that sidesaddle I used to use with her.”

“Excellent. I will write him and let him know. Perhaps you would like to ride over with the groom?”

“Yes, I would like that. Thank you, Papa.”

She ran to dress in her older riding habit. When she was done, she met the groom that would lead Old Shan while she rode her own horse. Pudding was standing ready, and she was helped up by another groom. With a merry wave to her father, she set off.

George looked up from where he stood in the yard, talking with Rivers, to see three horses coming up the drive. Henrietta’s unmistakable form was riding the foremost.

She nodded to George and smiled, saying, “Sir William requested a horse and a saddle. I have brought both.”

“Let me get my sister-in-law!”

He stepped into the house and returned a moment later with Eliza, who was buttoning up a spencer. William followed and she squealed when he lifted her up into the saddle. Old Shan was not a tall horse, but Eliza still looked uncertainly at the distance to the ground. William helped to situate her legs and adjusted the length of the stirrup for her. Then, he handed her the reins.

Henrietta gave her a few pointers on her seat and then William led her about. Eliza had been used to driving her pony, Bunches, so she had some idea about reining, and she soon realized it was not that much different.

George and William went to the stable to have horses saddled for them, and then the four of them rode very sedately into a nearby empty field. William stayed by Eliza, walking along the drystone wall, while Henrietta cantered Pudding ahead and, after a moment, was joined by George.

She saw him coming and urged her horse faster. Her heart raced as she pushed Pudding to jump over the low drystone wall into the next field. She sensed rather than heard George follow and reined to one side to gallop wildly around the edge of the field. George shouted and came up beside her and the two of them raced neck and neck for a moment. Henrietta glanced over and found his eyes upon her. For a moment, all was forgotten. Then she spurred Pudding to jump once more into the field where Eliza and Sir William still rode.

Henrietta laughed, her peals ringing across the field. She swept her horse in a circle, and George managed to bring his around until they were both cantering on opposite sides of the same circle. Their eyes met as their horses danced, then Henrietta reined Pudding off toward Eliza and William. She trotted up to them and turned to walk sedately along with them.

George soon joined them, and asked, "So, sister, how do you like riding? You certainly look the part of a little equestrienne!"

"I like it very much and am hopeful to eventually ride as well as you three."

"I am surprised William is setting so slow a pace." George smiled as he said it.

"I am happy to simply ride by my wife's side," he said. "Miss Darrow, did your father say whether we could keep this horse for some time?"

"I can vouch for the fact that he would be very happy to have someone else take on her board and food. Shan is never ridden and could use some attention. I think you may keep her as long as you need."

"Thank you, I think it would be very good for Eliza to have some source of exercise. Until we can get her a mount of her own."

"Oh, William, I hate to think of the expense," she said with a worried crease on her forehead.

"Nonsense! It does me good to see you on horseback!" he said stoutly and grinned happily at her.

"Well, I do enjoy this." She reached down and patted the neck of the mare.

When they were done, William helped his wife down and held her for a moment. Her cheeks were pink and all of them smiled to see it.

Henrietta took advantage of George's attention being on Eliza to ride by and steal his hat. She then raced off on her mare, carrying her prize with her. George raced after her and William laughed to watch him chase her around the field, over the wall, and back again. Henrietta was laughing breathlessly by the time she returned. George chuckled as well as she handed his hat back and he placed it very firmly on his head.

"Well, I must return home," she said, her face glowing with the exertion and the crisp air.

"I will escort you," he said in response.

"No need," she said rather quickly.

“All right then,” George said shortly, and the laughter was suddenly extinguished.

He jumped down from his mount and handed it off to a groom, then walked swiftly off.

Henrietta looked away, her cheeks red. Then she turned back to force a smile at Eliza and say, “Goodbye. You did so well today, we’ll be riding across the country before you know it!”

“Well, I have had very good teachers,” Eliza said from the protective circle of her husband’s arms.

Henrietta lifted her gloved hand. “We need to get you a riding habit—a deep rose-brown, I think!”

Eliza made a face and shooed her on before turning to go back toward the house.

Henrietta decided to ride through Lytchley to go home. It was longer than over the hills and fields, but she had not been through town in some time. She pouted a little at the Pratt house standing empty for the moment. She missed her friend.

It was late enough in the day that very few people were about on the main street, and she walked her horse slowly along. She came to the end of the village proper and then a little farther along rode past Little Cottage, where Eliza’s uncle Alastair still lived. She looked up and saw Addie Welles, the doctor’s wife, coming along the Stanton Road.

She slowed down and nodded to Mrs. Welles.

The woman flapped her hand at her and called out, “Halloo Miss Darrow! Been visiting our new Lady Strathom? Such a tragedy for her, but then she is young and will recover. No reason to think she can’t have a child despite this miscarriage. Dr. Welles thinks she was incredibly lucky they were able to stop the bleeding or it may have ended much worse.”

She reached up and patted Pudding’s nose before continuing.

“Lovely horse! I see that Mr. George Strathom is in town. Really, quite an extraordinary relationship he and his brother have, even though they are only half-blood. Remarkable that Sir William would split the estate.”

“He what? Tredwell?”

“No! The entire estate—he gave the London house and half of the family fortune to Mr. George. Settled it all on him and gave him his independence.”

“I did not know.”

“Did you not? I thought as you are such friends with Lady Strathom that she might have told you. But then, she has had other things to think of. And so, Minnie Dutton is to be a lady’s maid to Lady Strathom. I wonder how she will like it—having a maid for the first time in her life. Well, after all she has been through this past week-and-a-half, I imagine it will come as quite a blessing to her. A little help when one is ill is always welcome.”

“Mrs. Welles, I think I must...”

“Of course, you want to get home before it gets too late. I will let you go,

then. Do be careful, my dear. We don't want you ending up like Mr. George!" Addy ambled quickly off, headed toward the village and home, leaving Henrietta to continue slowly on.

She was thoughtful. George had his independence? But then, why had he not said anything? Perhaps all along he had only needed her dowry to make his fortune and had not actually loved her.

No, she told herself, she knew he cared, or at least that he had cared. His ardor may have cooled since her incident, but it had been there. But now? She could think of no reason why he did not speak now except that he did not want her anymore.

A tear squeezed out the corner of her eye, traced its way down her cheek and dropped onto her breast. She urged Pudding into a canter and then turned her onto the drive leading to home. Pudding had to work to get up the hill and they trotted the rest of the way to the actual manor. A groom came forward to take the horse and hold her while Henrietta slid down from the saddle. She stroked her horse's neck and then went indoors.

Hatcher joined her in her room to help her change out of her riding clothes and into evening clothes. It felt heavenly to unpin the hat from her head and loosen her hair. It was short-lived, for Hatcher then had to brush it out and redress it.

Henrietta merely stared through the mirror as her maid worked, thinking of George and how he had withheld the news of his independence from them.

Supper was quiet. The candles lit the room, reflecting off the red walls with a warm glow. The pheasant was tender, and her father was full of stories of the morning's sport. Her mother had a letter from Reggie and read it aloud between bites and many comments about how her son was wasting his time. He mentioned Penelope once or twice, and Henrietta was glad to find that her friend was being included in some of the activities she could no longer partake in.

She listened until the table fell silent, then said into the quiet, "Were you aware that Sir William split the family holdings? Mr. George Strathom now owns the house in town and has an income."

She was gratified by the way her parents both went still and then looked up at her.

Her father cleared his throat and was the first to speak. "No, I had not heard that. Bravely done by Sir William. Chancy thing, splitting estates."

"He is still the second son of a first baronet—practically no one," Lady Loughton said.

"But a thoroughly good man and someone to depend upon when needed." Her father's response was firm, in a voice that brooked no argument.

Lady Loughton sniffed, her manner toward George softened by both his behavior toward his sister-in-law and the news of his independence. The question that lay heavy in the air went unanswered by any of them. What stopped him now from speaking?

George, indeed, was asking himself the same question. Refused twice now, he did not feel he had the courage to ask yet again. He struggled with himself, but he was leaving early in the morning and would have no opportunity to speak before he left to return to London. He leaned back against the cushions of the couch, and then looked up as Eliza walked slowly toward him.

“George?”

He looked up from his glass and replied with uplifted eyebrows.

“You should not take Henrietta’s reactions so strongly to heart.”

He was surprised, and it showed in his face.

With a slight air of weariness, Eliza sat beside him and said, “She is very confused just now. She feels violated, as though she is no longer of value, and that the world judges her.”

George frowned. “That is nonsense...”

“No,” said Eliza. “It is not. Think what she endured at the hands of that scoundrel. She has told me just a small bit of it—he struck her, and held a knife to her, touched her in a despicable manner and tried to do worse. She was kept perfectly helpless and at the mercy of that man. She felt completely devalued as a person. And then, the one man she cares for most saw her in that state. How is she to know you don’t think of her like that every time you see her?”

He was silent for a minute, then said, “A part of me does remember that moment, and it makes me want to tear something apart. But I don’t think the worse of her for it, I think the worse of him for it.”

“But how is she to know that? She sees the memory in your face, the reaction you have, and takes it quite personally.”

He shook his head. “And how do we find our way out of this?”

It was her turn to shake her head. “I don’t know, but I know you must.”

“And I am out of time. I must return to London to take care of things.”

She reached over and laid her hand on his arm. “Thank you for coming. I am so glad you were here. William would have been lost without you.”

His hand covered hers. “He would be lost without you. Best be sure you take care of yourself.”

She smiled and nodded.

Supper was announced and he helped her up. They went in together, and William joined them at the bottom of the stairs.

George was silent through much of supper. He wanted to ride to Hadring, march in, and declare his intentions to marry Henrietta and defy the Loughtons.

His eating slowed as he considered his last two attempts. He did not think he could stomach yet another refusal, so he finished his supper and went upstairs to continue packing.

Chapter Twenty-Six

The day was sunny, with the promise of warmth in the afternoon, though the morning was still quite cool. The Park was already filling with riders on the beautiful day, and George was among them. He rode absently, though, following a preset course, and even his horse seemed attuned to the routine.

He had ridden halfway round the park when he heard someone call, “Mr. Strathom!”

He looked up to see Augusta Abernethy riding sedately toward him, her chaperone several paces back. He reined his horse in and waited for her to catch up and they turned in step together.

“Well, Miss Abernethy, and how is the Season treating you?”

Her expression fell somewhat, and she sighed. “Well, I have had a proposal.”

“Indeed!” He said, somewhat surprised.

“Yes. My cousin.” She glanced up at him.

“D’Courcy?” he exclaimed.

“Yes.” Her chin lifted a little.

“You do not mean to say you are considering his proposal?” he said, somewhat confusedly. “But pardon me, it is not my place to intrude.”

“No, but I mean, yes. What he did was abominable, but I think he has been misunderstood and acted out of desperation,” she said in a rush.

“You can say this? You, who know what he is?”

“I have known him all my life. If you had seen how despondent he was over what he has done...” she pleaded.

“I have seen some portion of the depth of Miss Darrow’s despair and it is enough.” He twitched his reins just a touch more harshly than necessary.

She hung her head, but then lifted it and said, “Please tell her that I knew nothing of it. As for the other, perhaps if I marry him, he will settle and become the gentleman he knows he should be. I know I could help him change.”

George could not answer. He had no way to convince her otherwise when she was so bent on finding him worthy. He was trying to formulate some answer when he saw a familiar young lady riding. He looked up into the eyes of Penelope Pratt.

“Miss Pratt, I had no idea you were in London! Or that you had taken up riding!” he said with real delight in his voice.

She colored very becomingly and replied, “Father surprised me with this horse and habit when I got here. He is determined that I shall be an accomplished horsewoman.”

“Well, you certainly look the part.” He smiled at her black riding habit, and the flaxen-maned sorrel she rode.

“I may look it, but I am far from feeling it.”

George caught her meaningful glance at his companion and said, “Pardon me. Miss Penelope Pratt, Miss Augusta Abernethy.”

The ladies nodded to one another and Augusta reined her horse around and said, “I will leave you now, Mr. Strathom. It was lovely talking with you. Goodbye, Miss Pratt.”

Penelope watched her go, then frowned. “Abernethy...that name is familiar. Isn’t that Henrietta’s particular friend?”

“Yes,” George replied.

“And wasn’t it her cousin who...?” She shifted her seat and made a small face as she did so.

“Yes,” George said shortly.

“She doesn’t seem like someone who would be complicit in such an underhanded scheme,” she said, her gaze following Augusta.

“She wasn’t. But, she may be just as much a victim.” He stopped himself from saying anything more, and asked instead, “Are you certain you are comfortable on that saddle?”

She shifted in her seat yet again. “The groom set the stirrup, but it just feels wrong.”

George looked at it and frowned. “It is far too short for your leg, Miss Pratt.” He swung down and went to the side where the stirrup hung, and she moved her leg out of the way so he could adjust it. He lengthened the strap and helped slip her foot back into the stirrup. “There, is that better?”

She let out a sigh of relief. “Oh, it is indeed. Thank you!”

“You are very welcome.” He vaulted aloft once more and smiled at her.

She asked after Eliza and he was happy to give her a good account. He wanted to ask after Henrietta, knowing that Penelope had probably heard from her quite recently, but was afraid it might appear odd...then realized it would be odd if he didn’t ask. By then, the moment had passed.

He sighed and pulled up as he reached the gate, saying, “Here is where I leave you, Miss Pratt. Good luck with your ride!”

“Good day, Mr. Strathom!” She turned and rode thoughtfully on, her father’s groom in her wake.

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Henrietta carried her letters to the settee in the parlor and curled up there. She opened the one from Penelope and read the contents, but two lines in

particular seemed to stand out from the rest:

...and who do you think I met my very first ride in Hyde Park but Mr. George Strathom. He was riding with a Miss Augusta Abernethy and did me the most agreeable service...

George had been riding with Augusta? Jealousy pierced through her. Images of him dancing with her at balls, his kindness to her, all painted only one possible image in her mind—George was now courting Augusta Abernethy.

Surely, she thought, he would never associate himself with anyone so closely allied to the scoundrel who had ruined my reputation? Not George!?

She set the letter down, no longer interested in news from London. She felt deadened inside, as though every reason for living had been extinguished. She never would have expected such a betrayal from George Strathom.

A part of her reasoned that as of yet she knew so little, that any thought on the subject was mere conjecture. But her heart knew different—it must be true! He had shifted his attentions to another, and not just any other—Augusta Abernethy!

The bell rang, and she heard the butler announce Lord Tollingham. She stood, startled, to see her friend standing there in his best attire. He came to her and she motioned him into a chair. His hair was carefully combed into a Titus style and he stopped himself from running his hand through it.

He looked at her and bowed. “I was swinging by and thought I would deliver this personally. Tuesday next. Just a little early summer thing, you know. But it would be lovely to have you there.”

He then handed over the handwritten invitation, which she took with a slightly confused air.

“Well, Tollie, that will be lovely. How have you been? I don’t think I have seen you since I left for London.” She tried to smile gaily, but rather failed.

“No, and that is another reason I stopped to see you.” His expression was gentle.

“No doubt you heard what happened.” She looked up at him, head tilted almost warily to one side.

“Indeed, yes. I heard also the coward declined to meet your father on the field of honor.” Tollie’s face hardened.

“Yes, but I am somewhat relieved. I don’t quite understand the need to shoot things. Not that I don’t honor what you did with the Marquess, but...”

He waved it away. “The man had disgraced enough women, some in my own household. Had to be stopped. But this, this isn’t much different, my dear.”

“Well, it is over now.” She fingered her letter and played with the corner of the paper where it still lay open in her lap. She noted Tollie eyeing it and belatedly folded it up and sighed. “Just news of our friends in London. Penelope Pratt says how she saw Mr. George Strathom in Hyde Park.”

“Oh yes?”

“Yes.”

He reached out and took her hands. “My dearest Hen, if any woman could tempt me to matrimony, it is you.”

With a sigh, she disengaged her hands and raised them before her. “Please, Tollie, don’t. Not now.”

“Hen, stop and listen.” She stilled and looked up at him from the corner of her eyes. “I know what has happened, and I have a feeling there may have been a disappointment as well. Am I right?”

She nodded ever so slightly but he continued.

“I don’t offer myself as the ideal husband, but I can promise not to make any demands upon you, except perhaps to grace my arm at social events. I would let you live your life, just as I would live mine. But you would be free of your home, in command of your own. What do you say?”

“Oh, Tollie, it sounds wonderful. And yet, I had wanted so much more, and yet so much less.”

“My dear, I know. But I would have you consider my offer, if you would.”

She raised her eyes to him then, and said, “Gracious and kind as you are, I cannot do that to you.”

“Am I so awful a prospect?”

“No, but you deserve so much more than what I can give you.”

“Just think about it—that is all I ask.”

The corners of her mouth lifted slightly and nodded. “I can do that.”

He nodded and stood, and said in his normal jocular tone, “And I expect a dance at my little ‘do’ next week!”

“Of course—now that, I can promise you.”

He left then, just as Lady Loughton was coming down the stairs.

She came into the parlor and said, “Who was that, Henrietta?”

“Lord Tollingham.”

“What did he....Oh, Oh! Henrietta, did he...” She stuttered, hands fluttering in front of her.

Henrietta sighed. “Yes, Mama, he proposed.”

“And?” She grasped her hands in an effort to stop their fluttering.

“I said I would think about it,” Henrietta said very evenly.

“Oh! Oh, my dear...and you will, won’t you?”

“Of course, Mama.” She fingered Penelope’s letter and blinked back the tears. “Of course.”

It was some days later when George came down to breakfast and saw the letter lying beside his plate. He opened it and read the contents, frowning as he did so.

My dear Strathom,

I hope this letter finds you well. I felt it only right to inform you that I have asked for Miss Darrow’s hand. I had at one time thought her intended

for you, but I understand your attentions have turned towards another. That being so, my way appears clear. However, I wanted everything to be all above board between us.

Respectfully,

Tollie

He reread the letter several times, then reached almost blindly for the bell. When his man arrived, he quickly ordered the carriage and for his trunk to be packed.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Eliza reined her horse in slightly and waited for Henrietta to catch up. Shan stood quietly. Henrietta jogged Pudding closer and then slowed her to a walk. The two of them rode in comfortable silence for some time.

Eliza looked around. "Where are you taking me?"

Henrietta's eyebrows raised archly and she said, "Yours isn't the only abbey hereabouts!"

"I had heard of the ruins, but have never seen them."

"They are not far, at least not on horseback." She was silent for a moment, then said, "Have you heard from George recently?"

"I believe he wrote to William that he would be stopping by, but I heard nothing else. I know he is very busy handling the business and his household."

"I think it a wonderful thing that Sir William has done. Are you sure you don't mind?"

Eliza shook her head. "It has always seemed a hard thing to me, that one child would get everything, and the rest be left to their own devices."

"And yet, estates can only be split so many times before there is nothing left to split."

"I know. I don't know what the solution is, but I only know I am glad that William was able to do some good for George."

They rode for some time before Eliza saw gray stone rising from the moor to the left of the road. The girls reined their horses toward it and spent some time riding through the single remaining arch and through the empty hall.

"There is a peacefulness to the place that I would not have expected."

"No. And yet, I never feel sad when I am here. Except, perhaps, for now."

Eliza was silent at this, and the two rode quietly from the old abbey. The horses broke into a light trot coming down the low hill and Henrietta cast her glance over to her friend to see how she was taking it. After a slight bobble, Eliza held herself in good form until finally pulling her mount to a walk. She flashed a triumphant grin at her friend and Henrietta smiled.

Henrietta was thoughtful as she waved goodbye to her friend at Tredwell.

She urged her horse to a gallop and guided her over the road and up the slope of the hill toward home. The wind was cold as it struck her eyes, causing them to water freely. At least, that was what she intimated to the groom who took hold of Pudding once she arrived home.

She frowned at the sight of the carriage in front of the house as she came from the stables. Her brow cleared as she caught sight of the coat of arms on the door. Tollie? Her feet moved faster, and she went swiftly up the steps.

She pulled off her gloves and unpinned her hat, handing it all to the butler as she entered.

Her mother bustled up to her. "Quickly, Lord Tollingham is here."

"But why?"

"To see you, of course."

Smoothing her skirt, Henrietta went into the parlor where Tollie stood waiting. His face cleared when he saw her, except for the slight crease between his eyes. She curtsied a greeting and then sat on the settee. Tollie looked around for a moment, then sat in a chair nearby.

"Miss Darrow, thank you for receiving me."

She cocked her head slightly and said, "So formal, Lord Tollingham."

He glanced down, then lifted his chin slightly. "I have come for an answer to my proposal."

Her face went still, and she leaned back ever so slightly. "Oh, Tollie..."

He nodded. "I understand."

Rising, he turned, and she reached for him. "Please, Tollie, I..."

He spun and took her hand in his. Her gaze took in his short, stocky frame and his ridiculously high forehead that was now creased in some pain.

"My Lord, I hope you truly do understand."

"My dear, I see how it is with you. You love another. And I, I simply wish to spare you any pain." Her face crumpled at that and he drew her close for a moment. "Shhh. None of that. Go to your room and do whatever it is young ladies do to buck themselves up. Next time we meet, it will be as though nothing has happened."

To underscore his words, he held her out and smiled, but his eyes retained a little of the pain he felt.

With that, he turned and left the room. She moved to the window and watched as he stepped smoothly into his carriage and the door was closed behind him. The horses gave a small jump and the carriage rolled smoothly down the curving drive toward the main road to Stanton.

Her hand fell from the window, and she turned to see her mother standing in the entrance to the parlor. "Yes, Mama?"

Lady Loughton's eyes dropped to the carpet and Henrietta said in a small voice, "Please understand, Mama. If I could have given any other answer, I would have."

With a small nod, her mother turned and made her way heavily toward the staircase. Henrietta sat once more on the settee, staring blankly at the

room around her. The clock had chimed late into the night by the time she rose to make her way to her bedroom.

Morning found her empty of feeling. She rose late, preferring to eat her small breakfast in her room rather than brave her parents' long faces. Through her windows, brilliant sunshine flooded her spacious room. It filled her with a desire to be outdoors and she quickly dressed in a simple cotton gown with blue sprigs. She donned her periwinkle pelisse against the morning chill and stout boots for walking. Then she walked down the back servants' stairs to avoid her parents.

It was a long walk across the hillside and moor to the old abbey ruins. Blowing out a breathy sigh, she sat on the old wall. The sun was high and there were flowers scattered about in the tall grass. She watched a bug crawl across her boot and shook her toe in order to dislodge it. She heard a noise and looked up, only to see George standing not far away.

"George! What are you doing here?"

His eyes wide, he faltered for a moment before saying, "I wander this place sometimes, hoping to see you."

"You could have just called upon me."

"That has not worked so well in the past."

She bowed her head at the truth of that. "I wish I had known, I might have ventured here sooner."

"Would you?" he said softly.

She lifted her eyes to his. She read uncertainty there, and wished she knew what he was thinking.

"Well, here I am." She tried to smile.

"There is something of import that I have wished to discuss with you."

She went cold. Standing, she walked a little ways away and said, "Well, by all means, let us discuss it."

He frowned at the cool harshness of her voice and hesitated.

After a moment's silence, she turned around and said, "I apologize. Mr. Strathom. What is it you want to discuss with me?"

"A marriage, Henrietta. Some happiness at last."

Something clutched her very throat and she swallowed against it. She heard him draw near, knowing that he was being gentle in order to tell her, finally, that all was settled between he and Augusta.

She breathed in raggedly and said only, "Yes?"

His hands came up to settle on her shoulders. "Yes! Tell me I have a chance, still."

She shrugged him off and wiped her eyes. "You will have to ask Augusta that."

"Augusta? What? Surely you don't think I want to marry her?"

She spun around to him. "What else am I to think? After your attentions to her, and riding in Hyde Park with her, and..."

He stopped her with a kiss, a kiss that deepened as her arms went

suddenly about his neck and pulled him closer. A brief moment later, she broke off, sobbing.

He held her tight against him, kissing the top of her head and her forehead, then moving gently back down to her lips.

“Oh, George,” she finally whispered.

“Henrietta. Marry me.”

“Yes.” She pushed back slightly and reached up to brush his hair back with one hand. “Yes, yes, yes!”

He picked her up and spun her around. “Then let us go break it to your parents.” He went still and eyed her sternly, waiting for her response.

“Yes,” she said. “We must go tell them.”

He grinned then and bent to kiss her again. The kiss lengthened, and became breathless, and they broke reluctantly apart. She dipped her head and grasped his hand to draw him after her, down the little hill toward the manor house.

Lord and Lady Loughton were sitting in the parlor. Lord Loughton looked up as Henrietta entered.

Lady Loughton merely inserted the needle in the tambour frame and said without raising her head, “Henrietta, you will need to...”

“I think our daughter has something to say,” Lord Loughton broke in.

She glanced up and the crease between her eyes deepened. She left the needle in the fabric and turned to face them with her hands in her lap.

George stepped forward and said, “Lord Loughton, Lady Loughton. Your daughter has consented to be my wife. I humbly ask for your blessing.”

Lord Loughton’s expression was bittersweet. “Granted. And I am very happy for you both.” He rose and went to shake hands with George, then clasped Henrietta’s hands in his own.

Lady Loughton stood and went to her daughter and hugged her. “I hope you know, my dear, I have only ever wanted your happiness.”

Henrietta kissed her and said, “I know, Mama. I think we just had different ideas of what that entailed.”

Lady Loughton actually smiled ruefully and turned to George. A note of alarm crept into his face as she came near. But, she merely assessed him and then nodded before returning to her chair.

George looked at Henrietta and said, “I need to return to Tredwell and tell William and Eliza.”

“Why don’t you take the carriage, then Henrietta can join you and tell them, too,” Lord Loughton said.

“My dear, that would be ina....” Lady Loughton began, then cleared her throat and finished saying, “Perfectly appropriate.”

Lord Loughton rang the bell and ordered the carriage and sometime later George and Henrietta were within it, on their way to Tredwell.

William was walking to the house from the stables when the Loughton carriage pulled up. He quickened his pace to meet it as it came to a stop in

front of the steps. He stood back as the footman came around and opened the door. Henrietta surprised him by stepping out and drawing his brother after her.

William smiled hugely and reached for his brother and clasped him warmly by the hand while clapping him on the shoulder. Then, he swept Henrietta before him, saying, "Quickly, this will cheer Eliza to no end."

"You haven't let us tell you our news!" Henrietta protested.

"You told me! It only took one look!"

Eliza was standing with Haddley when they came in. Haddley faded silently back and left Eliza staring at the three who had just come through the door. Henrietta smiled, with George coming behind her to place his hand on her shoulder. Eliza squealed and jumped to hug Henrietta. Then they were all laughing.

Eliza said in a voice breathy from excitement, "We shall be sisters! Oh, Henrietta!"

William went to the butler and whispered something. The gentleman disappeared and came back with a bottle that he had uncorked and a tray of glasses. He expertly poured them each one and William offered a toast. The four clinked their glasses and drank.

Henrietta looked around at them all and said, "Now, all we need is Penelope to make this perfect!"

It was much later when George saw Henrietta to the carriage.

She turned to kiss him, and he frowned at her sternly and said, "Now, I am returning to London for a time tomorrow. You are not to get it into your head, no matter what you hear, that I have intentions toward any other woman."

She laughed and looked a little ashamed. "Yes, sir."

His mouth crooked up on one side. "I like the sound of that!"

She arched an eyebrow and leaned back. "Careful, or you won't hear it again."

He pulled her close and said only, "Kiss me."

Her heart fluttered at the expression in his eyes, and she whispered, "Yes, sir." And did so.

The carriage pulled off and swept down the drive with George still standing long after it had disappeared. His heart was pounding with disbelief and joy. It had been so long since he had truly hoped, that to have finally attained his prize seemed impossible.

Slowly, he returned to the house where preparations for supper were already in motion. He quickly went to his room to hurry and dress but was still some minutes too late.

"My apologies," he said as he entered the room.

William and Eliza merely smiled, and William shook his head as he ordered supper to be served.

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Henrietta could not wait to get home to write to Penelope. She jumped free of the carriage and ran up the steps. She waved to her parents and went straight to the writing desk where she quickly penned a letter to her friend. Then it was sealed, directed, and placed in the entryway with the others to be posted.

She went up to her room to find her mother there, sorting through her dresses. "Mama?"

"I am just looking to see what you have for a wedding dress. I rather like this rose one that was made by Miss Saunders."

"I, too," Henrietta said.

"With that bonnet and some lace for a veil I think it would look rather fine."

"So do I, Mama, so do I."

Chapter Twenty-Eight

George and Henrietta were married in the little church in Lytchley at eleven o'clock in the morning on a Saturday. Amongst the guests were the Pratts, the Strathoms, and the dowager Lady Strathom accompanied by her new husband. The party returned to Hadring Hall, where a wedding breakfast awaited them. It was a joyful time; Henrietta glowed with happiness and her husband nearly as much.

The carriage that George had brought down from London awaited them, and Henrietta's things had already been packed into several large trunks and a quantity of hatboxes had been loaded into a wagon that was to follow them. When the breakfast was over, the happy couple climbed into their carriage and were swept away.

Lincoln House awaited them. As the carriage pulled up, the servants lined up to welcome the new lady to her home. George led her over the entire house, leaving the master room for last. He opened the door and watched as she walked ahead of him. She paused with her hand on a small table, then turned and dropped her gaze.

He smiled and closed the door behind him.

The End

If you enjoyed *An Inconvenient Heart*, please consider leaving a review at Amazon, Goodreads, and BookBub!

About the Author



Grace Colline lives in Stockbridge, Georgia with two of her five children and way too many dogs. When she is not grading papers for her online Biology classes or cooking, she is dreaming of worlds very different to our own. For inspiration, she sits at her spinning wheel turning fiber into yarn until the story is ready to be told.

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